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Conference Proceedings

די פֿרויען

*Di froyen*

Women and Yiddish  
Tribute to the Past Directions for the Future



National Council of Jewish Women New York Section  
Jewish Women's Resource Center



The **National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW)** is the oldest Jewish women's organization in the United States. Since 1893, NCJW volunteers have been concerned with community service, education, and social action to improve the quality of human life.

**New York Section**, established the following year, is today one of the largest sections in the NCJW organization. New York Section focuses on women's issues, aging, children and youth, constitutional rights, Israel, and Jewish life. Through education, advocacy, and service, the Section seeks to improve the quality of life for peoples of all ages, races, and religious backgrounds.

The **Jewish Women's Resource Center (JWRC)**, one of the nineteen community service projects of NCJW NY Section, seeks to heighten awareness of women's extensive contributions to Jewish secular and religious life. The JWRC's research library houses a unique collection of more than 10,000 books, manuscripts, and articles, including materials on rituals and ceremonies, with a focus on Jewish feminism. The Resource Center's biennial conferences and annual programs explore our Jewish feminist heritage and examine issues relevant to the dynamic contemporary Jewish women's movement. Copies of life-cycle events are available to the public, and inquiries on women's role in Jewish life are welcome.

\*\*\*

**Membership** dues in New York Section are \$36.00 per year and include affiliation with the JWRC and free or reduced admission fees to all events.

For **information**, contact NCJW NY Section, 9 East 69th Street, New York, NY 10021; telephone: (212) 535-5900; FAX: (212) 535-5909.

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## Foreword

These proceedings document a landmark conference sponsored by the Jewish Women's Resource Center (JWRC), National Council of Jewish Women New York Section (NCJW). "*Di froyen: Women and Yiddish, Tribute to the Past, Directions for the Future*," took place on October 28 and 29, 1995, at Hunter College and the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City and represents NCJW-NY Section's continued leadership in providing forums on cutting-edge issues in Jewish feminism.

At a time when the Yiddish language and culture are enjoying a renaissance in the Jewish community, "*Di froyen*" was unique in that it was the first comprehensive conference on women's roles in shaping, contributing to, and continuing both traditional and secular *yidishkayt*. More than 500 people from all over the United States and Canada, Europe, and Israel gathered to discuss women's contributions to Yiddish art, politics and intellectual traditions. The conference bridged different generations and communities, all eager to participate in the historic recovery of our foremothers' place in Yiddish culture. Those present gained a greater insight into women's historical and contemporary roles in diverse Yiddish-speaking worlds and returned to their communities committed to ensuring women's continued participation in promoting a vibrant *yidishkayt* for future generations.

Over fifty teachers, scholars, artists, activists, and workshop leaders made presentations at "*Di froyen*." JWRC's Proceedings Committee's aim was to document everyone's contribution in the final publication and so the committee asked all presenters to submit talks, summaries, and excerpts from their work. Not everyone was able to do so, but we are pleased that so many did and that they were willing to contribute additional time to finalize their manuscripts.

We believe that these proceedings reflect the diversity of the participants and that the range of presentations, readings, and performances will serve as a valuable resource to all those interested in feminism and Yiddish. We hope that this publication will convey the excitement and vibrancy of "*Di froyen*" and stimulate a growing awareness of the richness of Yiddish and Yiddish women's culture.

The conference would not have been possible without the financial support of NCJW NY Section, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Jacob T. Zukerman Fund of the Workmen's Circle, and the Albert E. Marks Charitable Trust; the donations from individual benefactors, sponsors, and participants; and the work of the many volunteers who generously contributed their time, advice, and expertise. We want to give special thanks to the officers and Board of Directors of NCJW NY Section for their sponsorship and generosity, the Steering Committee of the JWRC for its constant encouragement and assistance, and Helen (Nicky) Caplin Heller, the executive director of NCJW NY Section, for her vision and guidance. Thanks also to the current and past coordinators of the JWRC, Ruth Ann Binder and Emily Milner, and to Rita Shapiro, JWRC administrative assistant, for their help in coordinating and administering the complex details of this event.

Publishing the proceedings was not an easy matter; in fact, at times it was overwhelming. We are indebted to Clare Kinberg and Ellen Rifkin for transcribing talks, Shulamis Dion for her meticulous proofreading, and Renata Stein and Ruven Millman for their help in creating the cover. One member of the Proceedings Committee needs to be thanked individually. Her co-members want to honor Ester Moskowitz, whose editorial, publishing, and computer skills made this publication possible. She worked for months with energy and good humor, formatted the entire manuscript, and prepared it for the printer. We are all in her debt.

### JWRC Proceedings Committee

Irena Klepfisz, Purlaine Lieberman, Ester Moskowitz, Beverly Post,  
Edith Samuels, Florence Solomon, Alice Zacharius





Photos by Roland (Ruvn) Millman

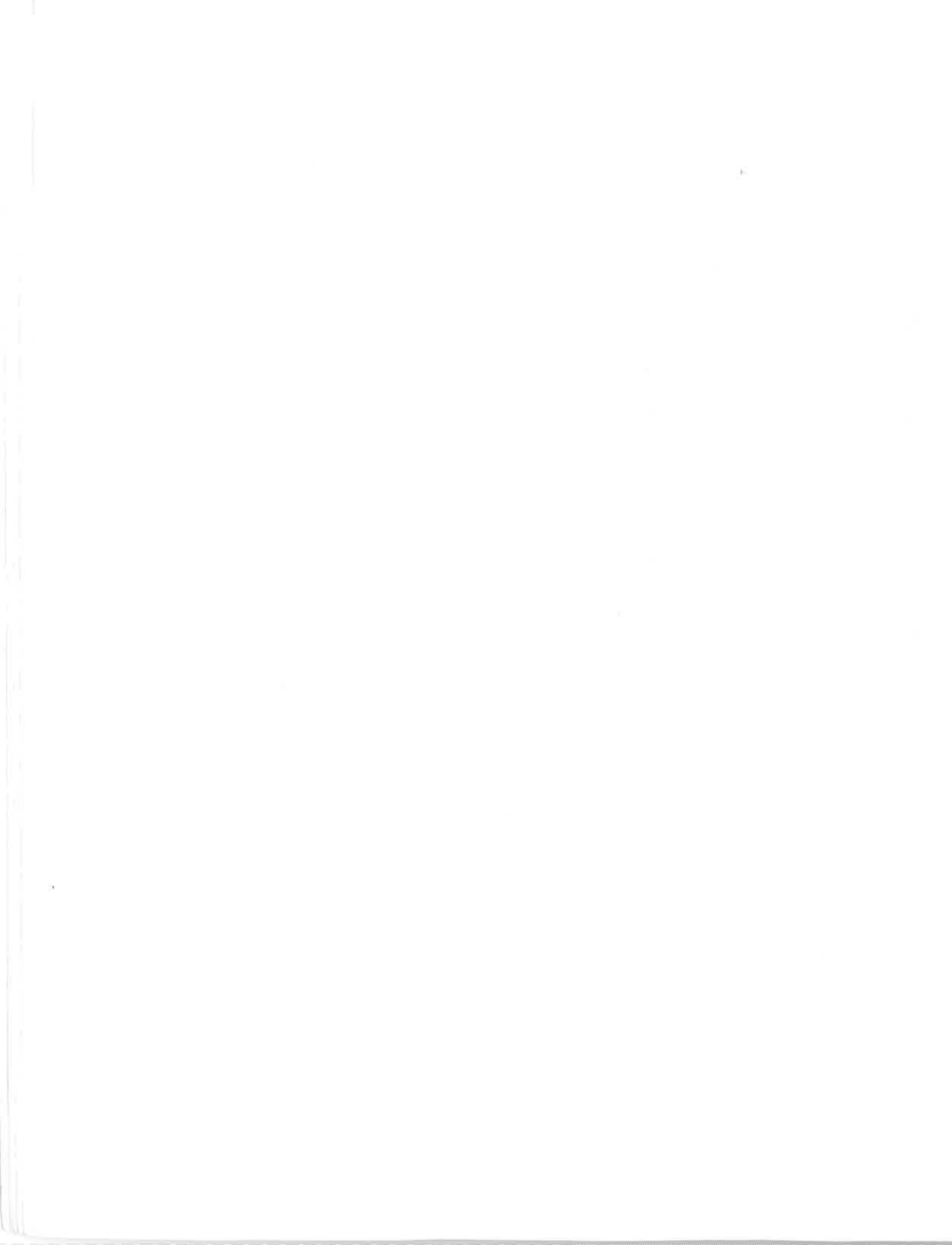




Conference Proceedings

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*Di froyen*

Women and Yiddish  
Tribute to the Past Directions for the Future



## OPENING PLENARY

Helen (Nicky) Caplin Heller

### GREETINGS

On behalf of the National Council of Jewish Women New York Section, I would like to welcome you to "*Di froyen: Women and Yiddish*," a conference sponsored by the Jewish Women's Resource Center. This conference, a vision many years ago in the mind of Irena Klepfisz, a committed secular Yiddishist and activist in the lesbian-feminist and Jewish communities, became a feasible dream two years ago, and tonight it becomes a reality.

This is a landmark conference because it is the first time that women's contributions to the study and ongoing creation in Yiddish is being celebrated. It is truly a tribute to the women of the past who forged a link to the present and to today's women who will shape the directions for the future. National Council of Jewish Women New York Section has entered its centennial of service this year, and this cutting edge conference is in the tradition of the ground-breaking conferences and activities that have been the hallmark of NCJW in its 100-years-plus history.

We are all proud of this endeavor. It is an effort of love and belief that what happens here tonight at Hunter College and tomorrow at the Jewish Theological Seminary will make a difference. Ruth Messinger, borough president of Manhattan, could not be here tonight, but she has issued a proclamation recognizing our event, which I will share with you:

---

Office of the President of the Borough of Manhattan City of New York

**Whereas:** A renewed interest in and appreciation of the delights of Yiddish literature, folktales and theater is everywhere in evidence; and

**Whereas:** Part of this Yiddish renaissance is a rediscovery of the past and present contributions of women in preserving and enriching Yiddish culture; and

**Whereas:** The National Council of Jewish Women, which has for more than a century worked to improve the quality of life for all people and to encourage an appreciation for the values of Jewish life, has sponsored a two-day conference on "*Di froyen—Women and Yiddish*"; and

**Whereas:** The reading, lectures, workshops and performances at this conference will undoubtedly encourage women's participation in a living and vibrant contemporary *yidishkayt*;

Now therefore, I, Ruth W. Messinger, President of the Borough of Manhattan, in celebration of this important and exciting *shifshvester* event, do hereby proclaim Saturday, October 28–Sunday, October 29, 1995 in the Borough of Manhattan as:

"Women and Yiddish Weekend"

In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the Borough of Manhattan to be affixed.

Ruth W. Messinger  
President  
Borough of Manhattan

---

I could not sit down without saying a word about the fabulous committee that worked on this event: No additional effort was too much; no meeting was one too many. Like the little engine that could, their motto was always, We Think We Can, We Think We Can. And the events tonight and tomorrow will prove that they could.

## Keynotes

Irena Klepfisz

### A YID OBER A FROY/A JEW BUT A WOMAN: WHY IS THIS CONFERENCE DIFFERENT?

Imagine this: It is the early 1880s. Anna, a ten-year-old Jewish girl living in czarist Russia, is a serious and precocious child and a dreamer who listens intently to the conversations of the adults around her. She has a keen eye and takes in the details of the lives of her family's workers. Though young and accustomed to middle-class comforts, Anna is sensitive to the suffering of others. She reads of the famines sweeping through the Russian countryside and also of Tolstoy's call to Russian youth to go among the peasants to distribute food and medicine. Remembering those early years of her childhood, Anna will write in her old age: "*Ikh hob geshlungen di ale yedies. Ober rayn platonish. Es iz kayn reyde nit gekent zayn, az ikh zol nemen an aktivn onteyl in der bavegung. Tsu vayt un tsu fremd iz dos alts geven.*" I devoured the news, but purely theoretically. There could be no question of my taking an active part in this movement. It was all too far and too alien."<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years later, that dreamy ten-year-old has become a seasoned anticzarist revolutionary. Exiled in Siberia, she joins other radicals in a massive rebellion. After the rebels are arrested, the prosecutor offers the women a separate trial, supposedly to enable them to receive lighter sentences. It is Anna who delivers their resounding and collective no: "We all acted as equals. Together with the men we placed ourselves in the battle for justice and were ready to die if necessary. We believe that a human life is not too high a price to pay for the realization of the ideals for which we are striving. We take upon ourselves the full moral responsibility for everything that has occurred."<sup>2</sup>

The words, the drama are the stuff of romance and of novels. Except in this case, they are history. The quotations are from the writings of the Jewish Labor Bundist Anna Heller Rosenthal: revolutionary, socialist, worker organizer, educator, Yiddishist, and feminist. Since discovering work by and about Anna, I've thought often about the ten-year-old girl yearning to be *nutsik in der velt*/useful in the world, to be *in der bavegung*/in the movement. Her yearnings stretched beyond the Pale, to places *tsu vayt un tsu fremd*/too far and too alien. She was a girl. She was a Jew. These were limitations.

What is astonishing is how severe the limitations really were and how absolutely she overcame them. By 1904, this same girl, this same Jew had matured and been transformed into a thirty-year-old woman who was a confident feminist with the moral strength to challenge the czarist prosecutor, refusing to give

him any opportunity to minimize women's roles in the revolution. Women did not need, Anna told him, *his* special treatment. "*Mir hobn gehandelt ale glaykh*/We all acted as equals."

But Anna's approach to women was not simplistic. After her release and return to Vilna, she became an advocate for the special needs of Jewish women workers and mothers and took upon herself the role of woman historian by recording the achievements of her women comrades. And always, hand in hand with her commitment to feminism, Anna also advocated for Yiddish and Yiddish culture through Yiddish education. For Anna Rosenthal it was never a question of women *or* Yiddish. Throughout *her* life, women and Yiddish were inexorably, naturally intertwined.

Because of that intertwining, it is important to remember Anna Rosenthal at the opening of our conference and to remember that though she was truly remarkable, Anna was not unique. That fact brings to the forefront what all feminists know who have lingered even briefly over women's history: Repeatedly we women are forced to re-invent the wheel. Today, to many Jewish feminists, the insistence on linking women and Yiddish seems unusual and unprecedented, historic — a cause for the proclamation by Ruth Messinger (see Nicky Heller's remarks, above). Yet Anna's biography tells us that more than one hundred years ago Yiddish and feminism were already the basis of one woman's life and activism.

I have no desire to romanticize Anna's life, the past, or radical movements. My knowledge of women's history and the nature of progressive movements make me certain that Anna experienced sexism and fought familiar battles. Nevertheless, her battles for Jewish women were fought in a *yidishe svive*/a Yiddish environment and, therefore, in Yiddish and, during her lifetime, Anna was recognized and revered by her contemporaries not only as a socialist, a workers' leader especially committed to improving women's circumstances, but also as a Yiddishist and Yiddish educator. Her struggles for women and for Yiddish were so thoroughly integrated that I sometimes find it hard to even imagine.

So in recalling Anna tonight, I feel somewhat humble because I know that no matter how excited we all are about our current work, much of what we are trying to do today already existed for an earlier generation of women. And I also feel angry that for so long Anna's life was lost to most of us, as were the lives of so many other Jewish women. Part of the mission of this conference is to begin the process of restoration of *undzer froyen-yerushel*/our women's heritage, to ensure that the work and the lives of Yiddish-speaking



women be reconstructed and honored. As some of you know, the feminine version of *yid/Jew* is *yidene/Jewish woman* (usually married), which degenerated into a pejorative. During the past months, when working on the conference, I have fantasized that we have reclaimed this term and that our rallying cry is "Yidenes of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your invisibility!"

But this conference is not only about recovering the past. It is also about preventing future amnesia. Over the past twenty years feminists and lesbian/feminists have made significant breakthroughs into the mainstream. This is good because it enables us to reach more people. At the same time, I feel wary. I cannot forget that the writer Zora Neal Hurston, a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance during the thirties, lost everything—recognition, prestige, money—when whites became bored with African-American culture; she lived to see her books go out of print and was buried in an unmarked grave—her name and novels rediscovered only when feminist Alice Walker made it a personal mission in the seventies and eighties to return them to the American literary canon. Zora's contemporary, the Jewish immigrant working-class writer Anzia Yezierska, was another best seller who sold her work to Hollywood and saw her stories reproduced on the silver screen. Yet Anzia died in a rooming house, all her novels out of print until feminist Alice Kessler Harris rediscovered them in the eighties.

Even within our own generation, in the last twenty years, the life span of Jewish women's writing and research has proven to be depressingly short. For example, the pioneering history *The Woman in America*, by Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, first published in 1975 and written in part as a response to Philip Roth's vicious depiction of the Jewish mother in *Portnoy's Complaint*, is now out of print. Similarly, the groundbreaking short story anthology, *The Woman Who Lost Her Names*, edited by Julia Wolf Mazow and published in 1980, is also out of print. Both books, central in shaping contemporary Jewish feminist consciousness, are now unavailable to students attending college in the '90s. Fame is fickle and women's history is too often written on water. So another aim of this conference is to find ways to ensure that our sisters living a hundred years from now will be nurtured by our hard work and will not be forced once again to re-invent the wheel of Jewish women's history. So this conference is also about the present.

How to reshape the present is probably the obsession of all activists. In thinking about Anna Rosenthal, we need to address basic questions about her early life: How did Anna become who she was? What enabled her in those twenty years to transform herself from a romantic girl daydreaming of doing good in the

world to an active radical, conscious of her womanhood and sisterhood?

I don't think we'll ever have a complete answer. Transformation and change can be outlined and traced, but in the final analysis they remain mysterious, almost miraculous. But we can be certain of one thing: that they take place. We *do* change. We *are* transformed. Very often the process is solitary, painful, and mostly invisible.

But we also know that change and transformation when connected to organized movements can and do develop in us a sense of collective purpose and shared responsibility. Working with others can be exhilarating and empowering because we know that we are—as socialist Yiddishists used to put it—*ale tsuzamen in gerangl*/all together in the struggle. The organizers of "Di froyen: Women and Yiddish" hope that this conference will provide all participants with a collective framework in which at least a feminist Yiddishist consciousness, if not a movement, will be more fully developed and that the weekend will, in the end, be a transforming experience for us all.

While planning the program, we were conscious of the fragmentation of our community. We knew of ardent feminists interested in women and *yidishkayt* who knew no Yiddish. We knew of ardent Yiddishists who had no special interest in women's culture and feminism. We knew of academics who were doing important research on women and Yiddish but had no interest in being community advocates for either. There is probably a bit more overlap than I am allowing here. Still, the separation, the isolation of these diverse segments of our community—all of whom in one way or another touch upon the subject of women and Yiddish—is very real.

Despite this, the program committee was determined to bring these segments together because we knew each had a significant contribution to make and because, only by bringing them together, could we ever hope to maintain the double and equal emphasis on women and Yiddish and to bring about the integration that existed during Anna Rosenthal's life. We are pleased that members of academia, of the feminist and lesbian communities, and of mainstream Yiddish institutions all accepted our invitations and will have *di gelegenhayt zikh a bisl beser bakenen*/the opportunity to become better acquainted. We are confident they will enrich each other's perspectives and hope they will forge new bonds and coalitions.

But this conference is also unique because it is being sponsored by a non-Yiddishist, nonacademic institution, the Jewish Women's Resource Center of the National Council of Jewish Women New York Section. This may seem peculiar to some. But consider that when Anna began organizing in Vilna at the end

of the nineteenth century, Yiddish was still deemed *zhargon*, the vulgar jargon of the masses. At the time, Jewish male intellectuals considered Hebrew the proper medium for Jewish culture and assimilated Jewish radicals thought Russian the only sensible language in which to teach socialism to Yiddish-speaking workers. Eventually they learned the obvious. Communication can only take place in a language which both parties understand.

Today, outside of the Chasidic community, Yiddish has become almost what Hebrew once was: the property of a small minority. It is perhaps a historical paradox, but many non-Yiddish speakers have come to regard Yiddish as a kind of *loshn-koydesh*/a language of holiness in relation to *velt*/*lekh* *yidishkayt*/secular Jewishness, a language that can confer upon us Jewish authenticity and, without which, many of us feel terribly inadequate, even inferior.

But members of the Resource Center who organized this conference have rejected this view of Yiddish and Yiddish culture. They believe that Yiddish women's history, literature, and culture are not the sole property of academia or of Yiddishist groups, but rather that they belong to all Jewish women, to all of us here, and must become available and accessible linguistically. Though some Yiddishists and contemporaries consider it heresy, many of us believe that given our linguistic context English translation is a necessary strategy. I am a committed Yiddishist. I have taught Yiddish. I am also a Jewish and Women's Studies teacher who always encourages students to learn Yiddish. But the reality is that at this moment in history, Yiddish culture can, for the most part, only be transmitted in the language spoken by the majority of the North American Jewish community—English. But translation need not be destructive. Quite the contrary. For many Jewish men and women translation is the first, the *necessary* step in becoming acquainted with Yiddish culture, the first step toward moving closer to reclaiming the Yiddish language. And Jewish feminists have been in the forefront in encouraging this process. My experience in the women's community is that translation keeps Yiddish alive.

But I leave the debate to you. You can raise it tomorrow as you listen to scholars discussing a host of historical women like Anna Rosenthal, Esther Frumkin, Sore Shenirer, Rokhl Brokhes, Kadya Molodowsky, and Rokhl Korn. And you can openly raise it with an older generation of women whose lives, from their birth till today, remain grounded in Yiddish—Yiddish artists like Chava Rosenfarb and Bella Schaechter-Gottesman; YIVO librarian Dina Abramowicz, scholar and folklorist Bina Weinreich, life-long Bundist Rozka Aleksandrowicz, and Yiddish actress Mina Bern. This weekend those of us of a younger generation have

indeed a unique opportunity to debate with these women, benefit from their experiences and wisdom and also to tell them of our own concerns and hopes.

The conference will also enable us to hear from an emerging generation of academic Yiddish scholars, from younger native Yiddish-speakers working with *Der arbeter ring*/Workmen's Circle, *Yugnt*/*truff*/Youth for Yiddish, and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research; from grassroots activist feminists and lesbian/feminists from the English-language magazine *Bridges*, which publishes Yiddish women's writing in the original and in translation; from the editors of *Found Treasures*, the groundbreaking anthology of Yiddish women writers published by Second Story, a Toronto feminist press; and from members of the newly formed feminist institute *Hemshekh*, which is planning to publish bilingual English/Yiddish women's books. And both Yiddish and non-Yiddish speakers can discuss with members of the Jewish Women's Resource Center how the momentum from the conference can be maintained after the conference ends and how we can ensure that our granddaughters won't be forced to rediscover our women's history all over again. I believe we all need each other. We need each other's resources. We need frank dialogue. We need to plan for the future.

The late Audre Lorde, an African-American, a lesbian, a prize-winning poet for whom the Poetry Center here at Hunter College is named, wrote an essay entitled "Poetry Is not a Luxury." I think of this often-quoted title tonight because I know it can be easy to consider this conference a luxury. Our world is not like Anna's czarist Russia; yet it is filled with so much violence, hunger, and illness that we must be alarmed. Politically we are witnessing a terrible period of history: fundamentalism, demagoguery, a more brazen fascism, unashamed racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia, a relentless backlash against feminism, and increased violence against women and children. Ours is not an easy time. We need strength and inspiration. Part of that strength and inspiration can be gathered from the joy inherent in art and from the knowledge of other women who faced similar hardships and challenges.

What feminists and multiculturalists call grounding ourselves in our culture, Jewish feminists of eastern European origins see as the necessary process by which we find our place in *di goldene keyt*/the golden chain of Jewish and Yiddish tradition. It is a process which makes us feel part of a historical collective and community. It is a process which enables us to address more passionately, more intelligently some of the terrifying aspects of our time; it enables us to create a Yiddish women's culture which draws upon the past at the same time that it incorporates our

lives, our circumstances, our present concerns. I hope that this conference will strengthen you and inspire you and that it will indeed serve as a catalyst for refocusing your lives and your commitments. Thank you.

<sup>1</sup>Anna [Heller] Rozenthal, "Bletlekh fun a lebns-  
geshikhte/Pages from a life history" in *Di yidishe sotsyalis-  
tische bavegung biz der grindung fun "bund"* (The Jewish  
socialist movement until the founding of the "Bund"), eds.  
A Tsherikover et al., Vol. 3 of *Historishe shriftn* (Historical  
Writings), YIVO, Vilna, 1939, p. 427.

<sup>2</sup>Cited in Dina Blond's "Anna Rozenthal," in *Doyres bundis-  
tn* (Generations of Bundists), Farlag Unser Tsait, New York,  
1956), p. 187. I have been unable to find Anna's memoir on  
the Romanovke revolt.

## Frieda Forman

### SHIFSHVETER/SISTER-VOYAGERS: THE FEMINIST PASSAGE TO YIDDISH CULTURE

It is a great moment for me to be here among you at a time of birth and rebirth of women's culture, a time of emergence of an authentic Jewish feminist culture which includes a reconsideration of Yiddish women's writings. *Es iz a groyser koved un zkhush*/it is a great honor and privilege. We have with us tonight at this conference women whose contributions to the renaissance of Yiddish women's literature is so central that we cannot think of this undertaking without them: Irena Klepfisz and Norma Fain Pratt were inspiring and shaping forces in my own project. Their literary, political, and scholarly works, begun decades ago, remain for me, and countless others, the light which illuminates our efforts.

At this time, I would like to thank the Jewish Women's Resource Center of the National Council of Jewish Women New York Section for believing in the importance of this conference and making it possible: *A hartsikn dank* (a heartfelt thanks) to all of you.

The term sister-voyager in the title of my talk, *Di shifshvester*, refers to that unique, often lifelong bond and friendship between women, forged during the sea voyage. They faced dire conditions, frequently in steerage, leaving the old country, *di alte heym*, for a new land, *di naye medine*. These *shifshvester* knew where they came from but not how or where the journey would end. Some were bewildered and frightened, others were full of hope, and many were both.

Tonight I hope to pass on to you a feminist ticket to Yiddish culture. I will be speaking of two kinds of voyages: the one which is depicted in the works of Yiddish women writers and the second, our own journey as Jewish feminists. Since my immersion in this *mikve* (ritual bath) of Yiddish women's words, I find it impossible to separate the two.

This conference and all that it represents, we undertake as *shifshvester*. The voyage we are embarking

on represents the coming together of feminism and *yidishkayt*. It is the bringing over, the translation (whose root meaning is "to bring over") of Yiddish women's literature and, with it, our culture and history. This voyage of restoration, this migration, is the ingathering of women who have been dispossessed: returning to ourselves, to our history as Ashkenazi Jewish women.

Migration, movement, flight, which have been ever-present in the lives of European Jews, are strongly and vividly reflected in the writings of Yiddish women authors. Of the hundreds of Yiddish texts by women that I've read and sifted through over the years, few did *not* contain, in some form or other, the theme of movement. The women in these stories migrated from the *shtetl* to large eastern European cities like Bialystok and Odessa or from the *shtetlekh* to North America (not only to the Lower East Side of New York or Boston's West End, but also to farming communities in California) and to South America. Some of these women wrote about making aliyah to prestate Israel from Europe and from Eastern countries like Yemen and Bukhara. And of course there were the narratives describing the flight of their authors during the Holocaust and afterward, the journey as refugees to North America and as new immigrants to Israel.

But destination is not the only difference between these migrations: The depiction of this virtually universal experience is varied and nuanced in the works of Yiddish women writers. I'll draw upon just a few to indicate their diversity.

Thirteen-year-old Deena, the heroine of Ida Maze's autobiographical novel by the same name, is forlorn and anxious about her imminent emigration from Ulye in White Russia. Desperate to avoid the inevitable, this "America" on the other side of the world, she prays that she'll be turned back at the border because of a blemish or trachoma. She can't bear to leave behind all that constitutes her world, a world which includes her dead brother and sister: "If they're dead and can't come with us, we mustn't leave their graves alone for all time, forever," she cries.

Malka Lee's autobiographical work, *Durkh kinderishe oygn* (Through the eyes of childhood), offered a different image of America: Here, she and the other joyful immigrants, hopeful of a bright, creative future, broke into "*Hatikvah*" when they saw the "golden land."

Yente Serdatzky's story "*Umgebittn*" (Unchanged) is, perhaps, more typical of immigration literature. Disillusioned with the radical movements of her day, disappointed in love, *she* does not sing a hymn of praise to the *goldene medine*. When she arrives, she finds the love of her youth, Avrom, "well off," with a beautiful wife, five well-fed children, and a thriving business. Friendless, unable to learn the language,

worn out by poverty and her miserable job, she attempts suicide.

For Zionists, the course was totally different. In Kadia Molodowsky's *A shtub mit zibn fenster* (A house with seven windows), it is the ancestral home which transforms Bashke's life. Molodowsky's strong-willed heroine is determined that she and her children be amongst the Jews from Poland who make aliyah and they do, leaving husband and father behind.

Molodowsky concludes the story with a tribute to the heroine:

In Rosh Pina, Bashke Paperno's house stands with its seven windows. The courtyard is enclosed in tall eucalyptus trees and is known as "Bashke's Courtyard." Her grandchildren and great grandchildren with blue eyes and uptilted chins refuse to sell or rebuild the house. If a wall sags, they repair it, so that it may continue to look as it did when Bashke built it.<sup>1</sup>

Not all women's migration stories were set in foreign lands; some traced the voyage of young women to other Jewish centers of eastern Europe. Miriam Raskin's novel, *Zlatke*, for example, centers on a woman activist in the Bund. Zlatke leaves the *shtetl*, despite her parents' objection, to join the movement in Bialystok. Raskin describes it as a "proletarian city, city of labor and struggle, where throngs of youth were drawn, fresh from the provinces, from the tiny surrounding towns. The factories and workshops opened their doors wide to them and they now constituted a great mass of true proletarians, future fighters for the revolution."

Zlatke wants her lover, Zavel, for whom she longs passionately, to join her in Bialystok, where, together, they will fight for their Socialist ideals.

What strikes me about these narratives is how much more varied and complex they are than Jewish-American immigration stories written in English. Yiddish literature presents not only a wider range of destinations but also a more comprehensive picture of what these women left behind: their homes, communities, their lives as workers, students, as political organizers.

Despite their significance, these documents of Jewish history, these literary works by women were not given a safe passage to the New World. Although briefly, often begrudgingly, allowed into the Jewish literary establishment, a rigid quota system was in place: Yiddish women writers, who wrote of women's lives, of our mothers' and sisters' experience, were, in effect, turned back at the border when the time came to provide them with a permanent place in Yiddish cultural history and, by extension, in Jewish history. Their works were consigned to oblivion by not being translated, by being left out of Yiddish anthologies, by being

ignored in Yiddish and Jewish Studies programs. It was as if they had never lived, nor ever written.

It is feminist scholars and readers who pointed to the vacuum left by the omission of women's voices, women's words. Until they insisted on a re-examination, there was no incentive or initiative on the part of the Jewish literary establishment or the Yiddish cultural community to retrieve and revive this hidden literature and the written history of and by our foremothers.

As some of you may know, or will recall from your own experience, every immigrant needs a sponsor, an affidavit donor. *Der afedeyvit geber* was the linchpin in the immigration process: She or he provided the document which was often the difference between life and death; entry to many safe havens, especially North America, was impossible without it. I remember that word, *afedeyvit*, from my own childhood in Europe after the war. I can still hear the sound of every syllable. It loomed before us continuously, not only the waiting for it, but the anxiety and fear that it would then not be accepted by the immigration authorities.

Yiddish women writers also needed an affidavit for their immigration to be completed. But not until now, in our time, has the *afedeyvit geber* been found. The *afedeyvit* donor of our day, who made possible the present revival of women's work and history, who ensured a life-giving embrace to our Yiddish women writers, is the feminist movement, and specifically Jewish feminism. As we know, reception is not a minor detail in this voyage; it determines how we survive the trip.

It was feminists who first recognized the suppression of women's voices, women's experience, history, and culture. It was feminists who made us aware that women's achievements are devalued, trivialized, and made invisible; that what is valued and prized in patriarchal cultures is attributed to the male rather than the female. Some patriarchies are less violent than others, but all, including the Jewish patriarchy, repress and diminish the female voice. Feminism, which places women at center stage, has provided a space and a standpoint from which we can view and review our Jewish world and Jewish women's lives in it. It means that when we do revive our past, we do so not with a sentimental, backward glance, but with a direction, a beam of light, for our lives today. Our female ancestors, our mothers and sisters, are now a part of our own history, our lives: Where once there was a void there is now a voice, many voices speaking on their own terms, their own sensibilities.

The women's liberation movement, the *afedeyvit geber* for Jewish women, has empowered us to inscribe our foremothers and ourselves into Jewish history, to make our history whole in a way it never was. This constitutes a radical rereading of Jewish his-

tory; it represents a transformation of Yiddish literature and with it a new understanding of Ashkenazi life. We have discovered and reclaimed a new terrain in women's individual and collective history.

Feminism's stress on women's specificity, on women's shared experience *as women*, alerted us to our own history and the essential place it has in our lives if we are to live fully as subjects, as Jewish women in the world. Jewish feminism has made possible the full translation, in every sense of that heavily laden word. But translation does not imply assimilation. Jewish feminism has helped us forge an identity as women and as Jews, an identity which compels us to search for women's history within Jewish history and culture—the return to the world of our mothers.

Language is a fundamental, vital component in every immigration saga, and in our quest for feminist *yidishkayt* we encounter two languages. Our two languages are feminism and Yiddish; both are carriers and embodiments of our culture.

Feminism is a language which interprets and gives meaning to our experience, and the feminist ticket to *yidishkayt* is a return to the mother tongue, to *mame-loshn*, to mother's language and speech. Feminism as language awakens in us the sound of Yiddish women's voices translating silences into words, into sounds which have rarely been heard in our day. *Mame-loshn* is central to our journey because it is a return to origins, to the original wellspring, to the motherlode of our being. Yiddish is the vehicle for transmitting Jewish women's culture.

Jewish-American writers such as Mary Antin, Anzia Yezierska, and Rose Cohen describe scenes of *shtetl* and immigrant life, but it is in the new language of the host, not in *mame-loshn*. It is noteworthy that some authors, including those in *Found Treasures*, the anthology of stories by Yiddish women writers, began writing first in Polish, German, or Russian and later turned to Yiddish, the language in which their works reached full creative expression.

Yet there were immigrants who adopted English and wrote for an English-speaking reader, for the "other," clearly not for the Yiddish-speaking immigrants with whom they came. This raises that crucial question, *For whom do we write?*

Some of you may know that Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*, the classic immigration autobiography, was written by a Russian-Jewish immigrant for Americans. Remarkably, or perhaps predictably, Mary's "success story" embodies the patriarchal sen-

sibility: She identifies with the father, with patriotism, and with the dominant language and culture. Mary's mother, who at first resists all assimilation, eventually falls into line with the father's instructions for Americanization. Antin herself longed to exorcise the past, to live only in the present. She embraced English; Yiddish and *yidishkayt* were abandoned. She forgot her *shifshvester*. It is unfortunate that for decades now, Mary Antin's experience has been seen as typical of that early immigration period and has been one of the few women whose writings are included in Jewish Studies courses.

The virtual repudiation of Yiddish women's prose works, in the original and in translation, renders Jewish studies incomplete, partial. The exclusion of their work is a serious distortion of Jewish history and culture, for our generation and for those to come. Yiddish women writers provide the missing link, the vital link in understanding fully Jewish history in eastern Europe, North America, Israel, and other parts of the world where migration took place.

This has been a cautionary tale: We almost lost our *yerushe*, our inheritance, to assimilation and to the obliterating effects of patriarchy. We sometimes suffer a double exile, one inflicted on us by the multicultural feminist community, where Jews are not counted as a distinct group, and the other by the Jewish literary establishment, where we are denied entry as women. Were it not for the efforts of Jewish feminist readers and writers, who unite activism and scholarship, who bring together the prophetic traditions of Judaism with the values of feminism, our maternal tradition would almost certainly have disappeared.

I want to urge you to look at the political implications of the Yiddish women's culture and history which has been passed on to us. A political reading presumes that we restore literature to its position of significance, that we revive it as engaged literature, one that affects all our lives. In recovering our history as Ashkenazi women, a history that is bound to Yiddish, we are providing the basis for a political presence in the world as full citizens.

Only as *shifshvester*, as sister-voyagers, do we come out of exile, the *goles*. There is a place to come home to, both a place waiting for us and a place we must create ourselves.

<sup>1</sup>*Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, ed. Frieda Forman et al., Second Story, Toronto, 1994, p. 316.

## SESSION I

### Panels

#### ***Women and Traditional yidishkayt***

*Chava Lapin-Reich, Chair*

Dorothy Bilik

#### **WOMEN ROLE MODELS IN *THE MEMOIRS OF GLICKEL OF HAMELN*: MERCHANTS, MATRIARCHS, AND MOTHERS**

Much there is that is miraculous about the historic personage who has come to be known as Glikl of Hameln and much that is miraculous about her manuscript. Let us begin with the manuscript. Given the vast differences between the survival rate of Yiddish manuscripts as against more privileged Hebrew *ksovim* (writings) and the even more daunting differences between the preservation of writings by women and by men, the survival of a lengthy manuscript in Yiddish by a woman is miracle indeed. Miraculous also is Glikl's own survival. She lived from 1645 to 1724, enduring plagues, wars, expulsions, and childbed fever. Glikl nevertheless bore fourteen children and, miraculously, twelve of them lived to adulthood, becoming the progenitors of the poet Heinrich Heine and the feminist Bertha Pappenheim, among other prominent German Jews. It is to these twelve children that Glikl directs her miraculously preserved seven little books which were untitled for 177 years, until 1896, when the great scholar David Kaufmann called them *Zikhroynes mores glikl hamil* or *Die Memoiren der Glückel von Hamel*. Glikl's specific audience then was her twelve children, six male and six female, their families, and their descendants.

Particularly striking, given that Glikl was a pious woman of her time, is that she does not differentiate her mixed audience but addresses her sons and daughters without gender qualifications, usually as *mayne libe kinder*, *mayne hartsbalibte kinder*. But if Glikl doesn't differentiate her children by gender, she emphatically does distinguish between those who read Yiddish and those who *lernen kon*, that is, those who read Hebrew. And the internal textual evidence does not show the conventional Hebrew/male-Yiddish/female separation. Indeed, given the facts that in Germany both girls and boys went to *kheder* and that Glikl's sons were not all scholars, it would have been likely for her to have had Yiddish-reading males and Hebrew-reading females among her offspring and their spouses. But, of course *lernen* in the sense of Talmud study in a yeshiva would not have been possible even for the exemplary wise women of Glikl's text.

Her narrative abounds in stories of exemplary women. A few tales are derived from *Brantshpigl*

(1602) and *Lev tov* (1620), two popular Yiddish *muser sform* (morality books) which Glikl urges her children to read, among other, more eclectic sources which she does not name. Most often, however, Glikl's role models come from her life experiences and usually are women who are part of her immediate or extended family. By including so many admirable women, she presumably precludes the awkwardness of presenting herself as the obvious model she demonstrably is. That she includes so many relatives, near and far, reflects on *mishpokhe yikhes* (family status), another of her rhetorical purposes. Of course, the very telling of her long, fruitful, and arduous life is itself exemplary, although Glikl's narrative strategy is rather to deprecate her own considerable accomplishments as an active and independent woman and stress the virtues of, if you will, the Glikl clones of her story. She includes a number of character sketches of women merchants who, like herself, took over breadwinner roles when their husbands became infirm or died, resolute women who defied civil authority in order to uphold a higher law, and other strong-minded and resourceful women.

As I have shown in the background article I cite at the end of this paper, Glikl's first book is a pious, prayerful introduction to the more chronological, personal, and familial history that makes up the matter of her text. Book II is one of Glikl's shorter books; nevertheless, it contains not only the histories of four outstanding women relatives but also a tale about a virtuous and resourceful woman from among Glikl's many Yiddish storybook sources. I shall limit my examples to some of the "real" women of Glikl's narrative, although Glikl's artful use of fictionlike pointers is manifest throughout her text even if her idea of fiction, if she indeed had one, is problematic. Neither will I attempt to reproduce Glikl's seventeenth-century western Yiddish since neither Meier Wolf, Mikhl Herzog, nor other dialect linguists are quite sure about the pronunciation of the existing written material of that era.

My citations are primarily from the original Yiddish version published by David Kaufmann (1896) and the modern Yiddish translation by Joseph Bernfeld (1967). However, there is one phrase in Glikl's western Yiddish I cite since it is manifestly false. Too many times does she utter phrases such as *lefi mayn vaybershn seykh* (according to my womanly sense) as if she were an airhead, but even more contrary to fact is another utterance that frequently follows a spate of moralizing: "*Mayne libe kinder, ikh bin*



*aykh nisht oysn far aykh ayn seyfer muser tsu shraybn un tsu makhn; ikh bin nit kapabl dar tsu* (My dear children, it is not my intention to write and to make a book of morals; I am not capable of doing so). Clearly, writing a *muser seyfer* was surely one of her intentions, and no one was more *kapabl dar tsu*.

Capable women populate Glikl's narrative. One of the earliest described is Esther Spanier, an aunt by marriage on Glikl's husband's side. She was "a very gifted, pious, and honorable woman who understood business. She literally maintained her entire household and traveled to fairs with goods. She did not bring much with her because the people in those times were content with less. She spoke well and God made her charming to all. She was well loved by the high-born ladies of Holstein."

This early description sets the standards and characteristics that Glikl wanted to instill in her children, particularly her daughters. Piety and honesty were paramount, as Glikl iterates many times over, but the ability to support a household was of critical importance when Jewish livelihoods went from rags to riches to rags with alarming frequency. Beauty and charm may be gifts from God but gifts are to be used properly. Glikl also indicates her social consciousness, if not snobbery. It was always a good thing for a Jew to have gentile friends in high places. And in the familiar manner of mothers to offspring, she, who can always cite dowries to the penny, nevertheless avers over and over that previous generations were much less materialistic than *hayntike kinder* (modern children). Here, too, we see an early instance of an attribute that Glikl emphasized throughout her memoirs and which was also stressed in later Yiddish literature and not always positively: The Jewish woman frequently serves as linguistic intermediary between the Jewish and gentile worlds.

The theme of the well-spoken woman appears also in Glikl's closer role models, such as her grandmother who, as a result of the plague, was left a destitute widow with two orphaned daughters and managed, after much hardship, to run a small business — the making of gold and silver lace. Soon she and Glikl's mother had a workshop employing ten women apprentices and thus maintained themselves. Glikl tells us that her mother found favor in the eyes of the Hamburg merchants because of her trustworthiness. The merchants trusted them with valuable gold and silver materials. One may speculate that the perilous economic and political condition of Ashkenazi Jewry at that time made it important that even a bourgeois Jewish woman learn a trade or craft. (Glikl's grandmother died in 1656 at the age of seventy-four, just to give you an idea about the time frame.) But more worldly skills were also significant for women. Glikl's well-known family anecdote about her father's step-

daughter, who spoke "French like water," was about someone whom Glikl never knew. Yet, not surprisingly, Glikl structures the story using the fictionlike pointers she employs when retelling the many morality tales that are such an organic part of her narrative.

This tale is also important for the insight it provides into Jewish-gentile relations in seventeenth century Germany. When a prominent gentile customer came to redeem a pledge from Glikl's father, he left the room to get the pledge and also left his young stepdaughter playing the clavier to entertain the nobleman and his friends. As she plays she overhears the distinguished guests plotting in French to abscond with the pledge upon the stepfather's return, naturally without paying him. She thereupon begins playing and singing loudly in Hebrew, warning her stepfather not to give up the pledged article: "*Bkheykh! lo hamashkn hayom*" (As your life is dear to you, no pledge! Today here, tomorrow gone). Her stepfather, realizing the situation, refuses to give up the pledge unless he receives the money. Whereupon one of the men says, "*Mir zenen forotn; di hur do muz kenen frantsoyzish!*" (We are betrayed; the whore here knows French). When the nobleman returns to redeem the pledge properly, he comments that it was money well spent to have your daughter learn French. This family story is structured like a moral fairy tale, with the innocent, virginal heroine triumphing over evil through cleverness and superior knowledge. It contains a moral, as Glikl's tales do: It is well to educate one's daughters, especially in several languages. [These supposedly high-born gentiles attempt to cheat their Jewish creditor and call the daughter of the house, who has been entertaining them, a whore. Glikl calls her a *b'sule* (virgin). *Hur* and *b'sule* are the words Glikl uses, but not in the Schocken translation.] Here, too, is an example of a clever woman's use of language.

Glikl often refers to the beauty of her daughters and other women, especially brides, perhaps formulaically: "*Mayn tokhter iz b'emes geven gor sheyn; hot nit gehat ir glaykhn* (My daughter was really beautiful; none was her equal). But physical beauty is less valued than the traits noted above. Glikl's attitude about her own appearance reveals her lack of vanity and the ability to laugh at herself. On the return trip from her daughter Zipporah's fabulous wedding in Cleve, Glikl and her large retinue of seven including a nursing baby could not return to Hamburg by sea because of pirates and had to return via land which was also quite perilous. Glikl's husband feared for the women of the party because of marauding soldiers. Glikl writes: "*Ikh hob gemust oyston mayn gut rayze kleyd un mikh onton in shmates*" (I had to take off my good traveling dress and put on rags). The Talmud teacher, Reb Meier, who was also part of the retinue,



asks Glikl's husband why he is so "*umetik un far vos farshtelt zikh ayer vayb azoy ekldik?*" ("Why are you so melancholy and why does your wife disguise herself so repulsively?") Khaym Hamel answers that he is not worried about the money that he's carrying, but is very concerned about the womenfolk, Glikl and her maid. Reb Meier, not the most gallant of men, comments smiling: "You need not worry, Reb Khaym. *On katoves* (joking apart), you are quite mistaken in your wife, and you had no need to dress her in such hideous clothes, for no one would do anything to her anyway." Glikl says that her husband was very *broyges* (angry) at Reb Meier for joking at such a dangerous juncture. That Glikl retells this insult to her appearance without comment is in itself exemplary and more revealing of her character than pages of abstract moralizing.

Perhaps the most intrepid of the female role models in Glikl's memoirs was Rebekah Lipman of Hamburg, who functions as detective, prosecuting attorney, and general gadfly to the male establishments, both gentile and Jewish. She fulfilled these roles in 1684-87, during which first one and then, three years later, another Jewish money lender disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Ultimately, Rebekah uncovered a sensational double murder. The circumstances in which Rebekah manifests her boldness and courage are perilous indeed. For, as her far less courageous husband points out, not only were they, as Ashkenazi Jews, without the rights of domicile in Hamburg, but her accusations could endanger the Jewish communities of Hamburg and Altona, since the alleged murderer was the son of a prominent and popular tavern keeper. Glikl tells movingly of Rebekah's sleeplessness, her very near madness, and her determination to see that justice was done, but being Glikl she brings in an analogous tale that equates Rebekah's sleeplessness with that of the king of Spain and the watchfulness of God, *der Got vos hit yisroel lozt nit shlofn un drimlen* (the God that watches over Israel does not allow us to sleep and dream). Thus it was with Rebekah, who stood at her window sleepless for days, seeking justice for the murdered young men until the opportunity to act presented itself.

In telling this story, Glikl emphasizes the suspenseful elements, plot twists, conflicts with reluctant Jewish leaders, even more reluctant public officials, and the constant threat of a pogrom from a hostile Hamburg citizenry. Withal, Glikl presents Rebekah as tenacious and articulate, willing to sacrifice her wherewithal and her life, trusting in God in the face of adversity when the murderer refuses to confess and the Altona authorities reject her pleas. Rebekah resorts to lies and trickery to reach her ends, and after many cliff-hanging discoveries and reversals, the guilty one finally admits to both murders. The angry Hamburg mob disperses, since the

Jews have proved their case. Glikl describes the sentence in detail: "*Me hot aroysgetrogn a psak-din, az mzol im redern un zayn layb aroyfshtekn af shtangen un me zol im aynshmidn in ayzerne ringen kidey er zol zayn an opshrek af a lange tsayt*" (The judgment was that he was to be broken on the wheel, and impaled and his body bound with iron bands so that he would serve as an example for a long time). But the point that Rebekah and Glikl are stressing in this lengthy, admittedly sensational, and gory story is not the eventual triumph of secular justice but, rather, the ultimate discovery and identification of the bodies of the murdered young men in order to allow the young *almone* (widow) and the former *agune* (grass widow), Glikl's relative, to remarry in accordance with Jewish law.

Rebekah's story is, of course, unique. But so, on a domestic level, is Glikl's recounting of her mother's giving birth to a daughter eight days after Glikl gave birth to her first daughter. With the wisdom which she displays often, Glikl comments: "*Azoy iz nit geven kin kine oder a firvorf tsvishn undz*" (There was no envy or reproach between us). But even in those days of large families it was a curiosity: "*Mir hobn nit gehat kayn ru iber dem oylum vos iz gekumen zen dem khidish, vi muter un tokhter lign in eyn tsimer in kimpet*" (We had no rest from the many people who came to see the wonder of mother and daughter in childbed in one room). Even without the *National Enquirer*, this was news, although perhaps not relevant to our theme. As we have noted, however, Glikl does portray her *getraye, frume, libe muter* (faithful, pious, beloved mother) as role model in a graver matter:

When my father died my mother was forty-four years old. Many good matches were proposed for her, but my dear devout mother wanted to remain a widow. She lived in her own small house with her maid, peacefully and respectably. God grant that if a woman is cursed with the loss of her first husband God should give her the same authority to remain a widow. . .

Like her mother, Glikl was widowed at forty-four, and many advantageous matches were proposed to her as well. Unfortunately, Glikl did not take her own advice and married in 1700, ostensibly to live a more comfortable life but, instead, enduring even more hardship and misery.

Of all the many exemplary women in Glikl's memoirs, not one is described with the superlatives Glikl uses for Pesele Reiss, Glikl's sister's mother-in-law: ". . . *Di frume Pesele hot ir glaykhn nit gehat af der gantser velt. Zind unzere umes, Sore, Rivke, Rokhl un Leye, iz zikher nit geven kayn froy, vos hot zikh gekent farglaykhn mit ir in frumkayt. Dertsu iz zi nokh geven an eyshis khayl, hot gefirt dos gesheft un mamesh gegeben tsu lebn ir man un zun*" (The pious

Pessele had no equal in the whole world. Since our foremothers Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah there was no woman who was her equal for piety. In addition, she was a 'woman of valor,' who ran the business and provided for her husband and son). Glikl explains that Pessele's husband, Dayan Model, was wonderfully wise but, *nebekh*, (unfortunately) bedridden and couldn't do much business: "*Gor oysterlishe zakhn hot men gekent leyenen in der tsavoe vos zi hot gelozen. Ikh vil vegn dem nit shraybn. Ver es vil zi leyenen, ken zi nokh gefinen bay ire kinder, vayl zey hobn zi avade nisht avekgevorf'n*" (Very extraordinary matters may be read in the will that she left. I shall not write about it. Those who wish to read it may do so since her children have certainly not thrown it away).

In her portrayal of Pessele and her extraordinary will Glikl has exposed perhaps more of herself than she may have intended. I have shown in the article cited below that the internal textual evidence indicates that Glikl's narrative is not unprecedented but is an extended ethical will, a genre that Glikl mentions repeatedly. I suggest that since the ethical will was usually written from father to son and in Hebrew, Glikl was constrained by modesty and convention to disguise her intention. Even more revealing is Glikl's paean of praise for Pessele's virtues, which are very much like her own. Glikl, like Pessele, was her husband's partner when he was alive and after he died ran complicated businesses, from a stocking factory to the stock exchange, made long journeys on dangerous and bumpy roads to fairs in uncomfortable wagons, provided dowries for her eight remaining children, was extremely devout and trusted in God's beneficence, and did not complain too much when her second husband went bankrupt and they became impoverished. Talk about your *eyshis khayl*. Glikl herself is "the woman of valor," an amalgam of almost all the qualities she lauds in others. But most resonantly, Pessele, like Glikl, left a wonderful Yiddish will. Her descendants may not have treasured Pessele's will with the care that Glikl's did, and it has not survived as Glikl's has. Who can say how many other women of that time also left testaments for their descendants that have been lost like Pessele's *oysterlishe tsavoe*?

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#### Chava Weissler

#### CONTRASTING VIEWS OF WOMEN AS RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS IN THE *TKHINES* OF LEAH HOROWITZ AND SARAH BAS TOYVIM

In endeavoring to reconfigure Judaism to give full expression to the religious lives of women as well as men, Jewish feminist thinkers have divided sharply over the nature of equality. Some have defined equality as equal access to previously male religious roles, holding that women should be able to be rabbis, cantors, congregational presidents, and Talmudic scholars. Others insist that equality for women in Judaism means far more than merely being able to step into roles or to study texts previously created by and for men. A true "women's Judaism," they argue, means attributing equal weight to new (or old) prayers, rituals, texts, and roles created by women for women.

This debate will probably be with us for some time to come. My present purpose, however, is to explore the light shed on this question by two eighteenth century Jewish women, both authors of *tkhines*.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the terms of the debate were quite different in the eighteenth century. I myself have chosen to juxtapose these two texts; as far as I know, their authors never met and never read each other's work. Further, eighteenth century women are not twentieth century women. Both women fully accepted Jewish law and rabbinic teaching, and their texts constitute less of an overt challenge to the Judaism(s) of their day than these modern feminist positions do to the Judaisms of our day. Nonetheless, as women claiming places for themselves within Jewish spirituality, these authors do have something to teach us.

The two women are Leah Horowitz and Sarah bas Toyvim, as she was known. Even with regard to their traces in the historical record, these women present a marked contrast. Leah (her full name was Sarah Rebecca Rachel Leah), daughter of Jacob Yuki Horowitz, rabbi of Bolechow, Brody, and Gros-Glogau, is, for a woman, extremely well-documented and from a very well-known family. She is mentioned in the memoirs of Ber of Bolechow and in various other secondary sources; her ancestors and brothers were well-known rabbis. Her father lived from 1680 to 1755; her most famous brother, Isaac Horowitz (Reb Itsikl Hamburger), from 1715 to 1767. I estimate Leah's dates as roughly 1710 to 1790. She was famed for her Talmudic scholarship, and, as her text shows, she was conversant with kabbalistic works as well. She is the author of one extant *tkhine* (although others have been erroneously attributed to her): *Tkhine imohes Sore, Rivke, Rokhl, Leye* (*Tkhine* of the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah), to be recited on the Sabbath before the New Moon. This remarkable text gives full evidence of its author's erudition.

Unlike any other *tkhine*, it is trilingual, with a Hebrew introduction, Aramaic *piyyut* (liturgical poem), and Yiddish paraphrase of the *piyyut*.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, the life of Sarah bas Toyvim is the stuff of legends. For a long time, scholars scoffed at the idea that there ever was such a woman, that she was more than a mere publisher's fabrication for selling *tkhines*. I have become convinced that such a woman did exist, not because of any new historical evidence, but simply because so many eighteenth century female *tkhine* authors can be documented and authenticated that the premise is now historicity and the burden of proof is on the doubters.<sup>3</sup> In any case, the only consistent information that appears in all editions of Sarah's two texts is that her great-grandfather was a Rabbi Mordecai of Brisk and that she herself lived in Satanov, in Podolia. By her own account—these two texts contain an unusually large amount of autobiographical material—Sarah was relatively wealthy in her youth but was later “punished for her sins,” as she puts it, and forced to live an itinerant, wandering existence. On the basis of the sources she makes use of, I have determined that the first of her *tkhines*, *Shaar ha-yikhud al olomos* (Gate of unity concerning the eons), cannot be earlier than 1711, while the second, and more famous, of her texts, the *Shloyshe sheorim* (The three gates), cannot be earlier than 1732. Thus, she probably flourished around the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Leah and Sarah approach the question of women's prayer, ritual performance, and religious power very differently. For Leah, women's prayer, spiritual power, and scholarly competence were issues that needed to be dealt with explicitly and head on. In the Hebrew introduction to her *Tkhine imohes*, she argues forcefully that she has the competence to take up halakhic questions dealing with women and that women have greater importance in Judaism, and greater spiritual power, than is usually attributed to them. Specifically, she argues that women can engage in something she calls “prayer for the sake of heaven” (*l'shem shamayim*). What does she mean by this?

It turns out that Leah has a kabbalistic (mystical) model for prayer. For the mystic, prayer should be devoted to the reunification of the male and female principles within the divine, that is, of *Tiferet* and *Shekhinah*, two of the ten *sefirot*, or divine emanations. Only by arousing *Shekhinah* and *Tiferet* to love and union can the worshipper bring healing and harmony to the broken cosmos we inhabit. This harmony, when fully and permanently restored, constitutes the messianic redemption. The divine union is envisioned in explicitly sexual metaphors, and the graphic description of the role of the worshipper is to stimulate *Shekhinah* to produce the “female fluids” that lubri-

cate her union with *Tiferet*. To accomplish this, the mystic must direct prayer solely toward arousing *Shekhinah* to unite with *Tiferet*.<sup>5</sup> Petitionary prayer, that is, asking for one's own needs (for, say, a livelihood, food, clothing) to be fulfilled, is scorned, by the mystics and by Leah, as less than true prayer.

It is startling to find an eighteenth century woman conversant with Jewish mystical texts and concepts. In contrast to Christianity and Islam, Judaism has nurtured no female mystics; all the kabbalists are men. Leah not only understands prayer as the kabbalists do, but demands mystical prayer of *women*. Her remarkable claim is that *women* have the power to bring redemption through their prayer even though they have fewer commandments to fulfill than men. Yet this spiritual power has remained dormant because women themselves do not take their religious lives seriously enough. First, as the Talmud says, prayer is only heard in synagogue, and the women of her day, Leah laments, “because of our many sins” do not attend synagogue regularly. They should be in synagogue morning and evening “for the Day of the Lord is at hand.”<sup>6</sup> Second, when they do attend synagogue, women often do not pray at all, but simply compare their clothes and jewelry. And third, when they do pray, instead of praying for the sake of the *Shekhinah*, they selfishly pray only for their own needs, for long life, possessions, and so forth.

In trying to persuade women to engage in true, redemptive prayer, Leah faces a dilemma. She knows that there are almost no women who have access to mystical works that lay the groundwork and develop the concepts of mystical prayer; she probably thinks that the explicit sexual imagery would shock women. Therefore, she makes a remarkable transformation, providing a paradigm that enables women without knowledge of kabbalah to pray for the sake of the *Shekhinah*. In the Yiddish portion of her *tkhine*, Leah transforms the sexual fluids of the *Shekhinah* into tears.<sup>7</sup> Even in the Hebrew introduction, she attributes the redemptive power of women's prayer to their ability to weep more freely than men. After the destruction of the Temple, the Gate of Tears is the only sure way for prayers to reach the divine throne (Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 32b).

The Yiddish text contains an appeal to the merit of the four matriarchs (the *imohes* of the *tkhine*'s title) to help bring the redemption:

Therefore, we spread out our hands before God, and pray that You bring us back to Jerusalem, and renew our days as of old. For we have no strength; we can no longer endure the hard bitter exile, for we are like the feeble lambs.... We are like orphans, like sheep who have gone astray without a shepherd. For the nations of the world have too much power over

us.... Therefore, we pray you, Lord of the world, take revenge on those who cause us suffering, for the sake of the merit of the patriarchs and matriarchs. O God, just as you answered our fathers, so may you answer us this month, by the merit of our mother[s... Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah].

There follows a plea to the merit of each of the matriarchs in turn. Most interesting for our purposes is the plea to Rachel, the matriarch most closely identified with *Shekhinah* in mystical imagery. This text suggests to women that they follow the example of the Israelites going into the Babylonian exile: that they weep and cry out to Mother Rachel, who is thus moved to weep and cry before the Holy One, Blessed be He, who responds by promising an end to the exile:

By the merit of our faithful mother RACHEL, to whom you promised that by her merit, we, the children of Israel, would come out of exile. For when the children of Israel were led into exile, they were led not far from the grave in which our mother Rachel lay. They pleaded with the foe to permit them to go to Rachel's tomb. And when the Israelites came to our mother Rachel, and began to weep and cry, "Mother, mother, how can you look on while right in front of you we are being led into exile?" Rachel went up before God with a bitter cry, and spoke: Lord of the world, your mercy is certainly greater than the mercy of any human being. Moreover, I had compassion on my sister Leah when my father switched us and gave her to my husband. ... No matter that it caused me great pain; I told her the signs [that Jacob and I had agreed upon to prevent the switch]. Thus, even more so, it is undoubtedly fitting for you, God, who are entirely *compassionate and gracious*, to have mercy. [God answered her: I acknowledge that you are right, and I will bring your children] out of this exile now. So may it come to pass, for the sake of her merit.

Thus, by weeping in prayer, the women who recite this *tkhine* can have the same, or greater, redemptive effect as the kabbalist who prays, with mystical techniques and intentions, for the redemption of the *Shekhinah*, and thus of the people Israel.

Let us bring this back to the question we raised at the outset. For Leah, women's status in religious practice raises urgent, explicit questions. And although of course she nowhere demands that women be rabbis or even be counted in a minyan, Leah clearly advocates that women engage with greater seriousness in activities usually considered male. She makes the claim, at least for herself, of competence in Talmudic discussion; and she urges other women to attend synagogue morning and evening and to transcend their mundane concerns in prayer.

When we turn to Sarah bas Toyvim's two *tkhines*, and especially to the better-known of the two, *Shloyshe*

*sheorim*, we are in another world. Sarah does not articulate the issue of women's religious participation as a question; it apparently raises no urgent concerns for her. With a few rare exceptions, she does not suggest that women participate in "male" activities such as Talmud study. Sarah does not advocate changes in women's religious activities, except that, like Leah, she criticizes their conduct in synagogue. Rather, Sarah takes the importance of women's religious lives for granted, and locates power and significance primarily in specifically womanly activities and rituals.

*Shloyshe sheorim* contains three sections, the "three gates" of the title. The first contains laws and teachings about, and *tkhines* for, the three "women's commandments": *khale, nide*, and *hadlike*.<sup>8</sup> The second section contains a long *tkhine* for the making of candles for Yom Kippur, to which we shall return. The third section, like Leah's *tkhine*, is to be recited on the Sabbath before the New Moon.<sup>9</sup> Especially in the second and third sections of the text, Sarah, again like Leah, fervently prays for the messianic redemption. However, she does not have a mystical model for prayer and clearly thinks that petitionary prayer is perfectly acceptable. In this *tkhine*, prayers for deliverance from exile and the resurrection of the dead are found in the company of pleas for enough money to pay the children's teacher and put together dowries for marriageable daughters.

Among the most interesting—and the most famous and popular—sections of this text is the *tkhine* for *kneytlakh legn*, for "laying wicks" for candles for Yom Kippur. Briefly, the evidence justifies the conclusion that, perhaps as early as the Middle Ages, women created a ritual of going to the cemetery, measuring its circumference (or individual graves) with strands of candlewick, and making the wicks into candles by rubbing them with wax and twisting the strands together. This was sometimes done in times of illness or trouble; or, as in the present text, during the Ten Days of Repentance, to make candles to burn in the synagogue on Yom Kippur. (Bright, long-burning candles were needed so that people could read the unfamiliar liturgy for the whole long day of the holiday, from dusk to darkening dusk.) Each woman made two candles, one with a wick for each of the living members of her family, the "candle of the living," or "of the healthy," and one with a wick for each of the deceased family members that she wished to recall, the "soul candle." There are several *tkhines* extant for various parts of the candle-making ritual. Both Sarah's text in *Shloyshe sheorim* and some of the numerous ethnographic and literary accounts of the custom suggest that in making the soul candle, the woman began, not with her own near relations, but with Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, and other ancestral figures.

Sarah's *tkhine* for making the candles (her other work, *Shaar ha-yikhud*, contains a *tkhine* for measuring the graves), probably reworks a text already extant in oral tradition. Nonetheless, she endows it with her own special power of literary expression. This is how it begins:

Lord of the world, I pray you, most merciful God, to accept [my observance of] the mitzvah of the lights that we will make for the sake of your holy Name, and for the sake of the holy souls.

May it be God's will that today, on the eve of Yom Kippur, we be remembered before you with the mitzvah of the lights that we shall make for the synagogue. May we be remembered for good, and may we be worthy to give lights to the Temple, as used to be done. And may the prayers which are said by the light of these candles, be with great devotion and fear and awe, that Satan may not hinder our prayer. And may the lights that are made for the sake of the holy souls, may they awaken [the souls] so that each informs the next all the way back to the holy patriarchs and matriarchs, who should further inform each other back to Adam and Eve, so that they may rectify the sin by which they brought death to the world. May they arise out of their graves and pray for us that this year may be a good year. For they caused death to enter the world, so it is fitting for them to plead for us that we may be rid of the Angel of Death.

The *tkhine* then continues with the laying of wicks for Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel (Leah is omitted), Moses, Aaron, David, and Solomon, and "for all the righteous and pious people who have ever lived." For example:

*By the merit of my laying a thread for our mother Rachel's sake, may You cause to be fulfilled, by her merit, Your children shall return to their country; that means in Yiddish, by Rachel's merit, God, blessed be He, will bring us back to our land, Amen. May her merit defend us, that she did not let herself be comforted until the coming of the righteous redeemer, may he come speedily and soon, in our days, Amen..."*

After the laying of all the wicks, the *tkhine* continues with some further prayers. It asks for forgiveness of sins, sustenance, and good matches for one's children, but especially for redemption and the resurrection of the dead that accompanies it:

Lord of the world, I pray you, merciful God, accept the lights that we make for the holy pure souls.... May the holy souls awake out of their graves and pray for us that we may be healthy. It is fitting for us to pray for the dead, for those who died in our own generations, for those who have died from the time of Adam and Eve on. Today we make candles for the sake of all the souls—for the sake of the souls who lie in the fields and the forests, and for all the martyrs, and for all those who have no children, and for all the little children—so that they

may awaken the dry bones; may they come alive speedily and soon! May we be worthy to see the resurrection of the dead this year, Amen, Selah.

The ritual of making candles for the dead and the living, together with its liturgy, embodies condensed and complex symbolic meanings. The text in the *Shloyshe sheorim* vibrates with messianic hopes. It also endows the woman's ritual action in laying the wicks with the power to enlist the aid of the dead in helping her own family and in bringing the redemption. And finally, it establishes a relationship of mutual aid and reciprocity between the living and the dead. The act of "laying the wicks" establishes a connection between the woman reciting the *tkhine* and the ancestors of Israel, which allows her to claim their aid. The act creates a reciprocal relationship in which the dead benefit from the meritorious act of providing candles for the synagogue, thereby becoming obligated to help the living. Further, it graphically expresses the connection of the woman and the members of her very own family with past generations of Jews, all the way back to the patriarchs and matriarchs and Adam and Eve.

Once again, to recall the question with which we opened this talk, we note that Sarah locates some of her most powerful writing in a ritual that was, to all accounts, practiced solely by women. Further, she designates this ritual a *mitzvah*, a divine commandment, even though it cannot be found in any legal code. This is consistent with the rest of her text, which hallows the domestic realm, the women's commandments, and areas of piety already culturally connected with women. Thus, Sarah's model for women's religious expression is to sanctify and develop a distinctly womanly spirituality, one that does not challenge accepted views of male or female domains except insofar as it assumes great significance and power for the woman's domain.

How does our discussion of these two texts shed light on our current dilemmas? Despite the appeal of Leah Horowitz to a modern scholarly woman such as myself, Sarah bas Toyvim's *Shloyshe sheorim* was far more appealing to her contemporaries. Leah, drawing her inspiration from the rabbis who were her near relations, tried to change women's religious practice to make it conform to an ideal stemming from exclusively male traditions and texts. And, in fact, men were impressed enough by her scholarship to mention her in memoirs and other sources. But the scholarly Hebrew introduction to her *tkhine*, in which she carefully couched her arguments concerning women's religious lives in terms persuasive to learned men, disappeared after the first two or three editions of her text. It remained unread by men, who did not bother with *tkhines*, and could not be read by women, who lacked knowledge of Hebrew. All that remained was the two-and-a-half-page Yiddish *tkhine*, which was reprinted,

sometimes anonymously, in the company of other *tkhines* for the blessing of the New Moon. Was Leah simply before her time? Or was there something about the nearly complete acceptance of male terms of debate that doomed her efforts?

Most important for us today was Leah's insistence that women take their own spiritual lives with the utmost seriousness and recognize the importance of their own spiritual power. Further, Leah realizes that male models must be transformed for women, even if in the service of male-defined goals. Is Leah's transformation of sexual fluids to tears to be seen only in negative terms, as a result of women's ignorance of mystical literature, or as a denial to women of the role of the erotic in spirituality? Or does it also build on women's strengths, on their capacity for emotional expression? Nowadays, of course, scholarship and the rabbinate are far more open to Jewish women. Perhaps now, with a greater number of scholarly women and greater access to scholarship in traditional sources for women, Leah has something to teach us after all. Women *do* approach traditional Jewish texts differently from men, reacting to them out of their own capacities and experiences. Thus, we can expect that giving women equal access to texts and roles created by and for men will transform our interpretations of those texts and roles. Late-twentieth-century Jewish women may have quite different experiences and capacities than eighteenth century Jewish women, but can still work transformative magic on the classics of Jewish tradition.

Sarah's text, by contrast, lived a long and vigorous life, and Sarah herself, although not remembered in elite texts, became a heroine of folk legend. The popularity of her writings demonstrates that they spoke deeply to women's needs and aspirations. Also, her robust and unquestioned assumption that women possessed worth, dignity, importance, and spiritual power gave her *tkhines* appeal and vigor. These texts addressed women where they already lived, in the midst of the activities they already performed, yet at the same time transcended the mundane with messianic aspirations and, in parts of the text not touched on today, with visions of women in paradise.

Is this a better model for us? Modern feminists have created numerous new prayers and rituals addressing such aspects of women's experience as pregnancy, birth, miscarriage, and menopause. Yet there is a dilemma here as well. Just as Sarah never challenged the limitations of women's domain in her day, these new feminist prayers run the risk of limiting feminist spirituality to a few narrow areas of our lives, failing to challenge—instead, even sanctifying—received stereotypes of women. Indeed, Sarah's ritual,

perhaps more wisely than ours, is not based on female biology. And her *tkhines*, like Leah's text, draw heavily on midrash and other traditional sources, although mediated through Yiddish adaptations. Thus, it may be more accurate to regard these two texts as presenting two points on a spectrum of women's religious expression: Both contain adaptations and transformations of the classical sources of Judaism, although they make different assumptions about what the focus of women's spirituality should be. The lesson of these texts, then, is that we recognize both the importance of Jewish traditions as a source for women's Judaism today and the power of women, fully conscious of their religious lives, to transform those traditions.

<sup>1</sup>*Tkhines* are Yiddish prayers for women, written sometimes by men and, sometimes, as in the material I shall discuss here, by women. For an introduction to the *tkhine* literature, see my "Prayers in Yiddish and the Religious World of Ashkenazic Women," in Judith Baskin, ed., *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1991, pp. 159–81.

<sup>2</sup>Very few editions contain the full trilingual text. Of two such editions known to me, neither mentions a date or place of publication. The first edition is probably the one found in the collection of the Jewish National and University Library (JNUL), Jerusalem, shelf mark R41 A460, vol. 6, no. 1. Another complete edition is found in the uncataloged *tkhine* pamphlet collection of the Jewish Theological Seminary Library, New York. A third early edition, which contains all three sections of the *tkhine* but paraphrases the introduction in Yiddish rather than retaining the original Hebrew, was published in Grodno in 1795 or 1796. It is also in the collection of the JNUL, shelf mark R75 A284.

A detailed treatment of Leah Horowitz and her text will appear in my book *Voices of the Matriarchs*, to be published by Beacon Press. In addition, I hope to publish a critical edition and translation of the text in the near future. My translation of an excerpt from this text appears in *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality*, ed. Ellen M. Umansky and Dianne Ashton, Beacon, Boston, 1992, pp. 51–53.

<sup>3</sup>There is a little more that helped convince me, for example, Sarah's distinctive literary style.

<sup>4</sup>While there are numerous editions of the *Shloyshe sheorim*, none of the early ones makes any reference to place or date of publication. I have relied on several different editions from the collections of JTS and JNUL. So far, I have discovered only two extant editions of *Shaar ha-yikhud*, both undated, a copy of one in the library of JTS, and an incomplete copy of another in the library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad in Brooklyn.

For further discussion of Sarah bas Toyvim, see my essays "Traditional Piety of Ashkenazic Women," in *Jewish Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Green, vol. 2, Crossroad, New York, 1987, pp. 245–75; and "Women in Paradise," in *Tikkun*, vol. 2, no. 2 (April-May 1987), pp. 43–46 and 117–20.

<sup>5</sup>There are various mystical techniques for achieving this end. See, for example, Lawrence Fine, "The Contemplative



Practice of Yikhudim in Lurianic Kabbalah," and Louis Jacobs, "The Uplifting of Sparks in Later Jewish Mysticism," both in Green, pp. 64-98 and 99-126.

<sup>6</sup>Leah evidently believed that the advent of the Messiah was imminent. There was much messianic fervor in eighteenth century eastern Europe.

<sup>7</sup>As Elliot Wolfson has informed me, the same transformation is found in *Reshit khokhmah*, by Elijah de Vidas, originally published in 1579. There is evidence suggesting that Leah was familiar with this work. However, even if the transformation was suggested by de Vidas's work, Leah puts it to the service of making mystical prayer available to women, an end de Vidas never considered.

<sup>8</sup>*Khale* (Heb. *khalah*) involves the separation of a small piece of dough from bread and other baked goods in memory of an ancient tithe given to the Temple priests. *Nide* (Heb. *nidah*) concerns the observance of menstrual purity rules. *Hadlike* (Heb. *hadlikah*) refers to the kindling of Sabbath lights.

<sup>9</sup>The women's commandments, the High Holidays, and the blessing of the New Moon are among the three most popular topics for eastern European *tkhines*; thus, this *tkhine* hits the already established highlights of women's religious lives.

## Shifra Epstein

### OD YOYSEF CHAI (JOSEPH IS STILL ALIVE) IN BROOKLYN: TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN THE PERFORMANCE OF A MUSICAL IN YIDDISH BY CHASIDIC WOMEN

My presentation today draws upon the production and performance of a contemporary biblical musical in Yiddish, *Od yoysef chai*, as a means through which to explore the cultural self-expression of Chasidic women in today's world. My presentation was inspired by studies of scholars, some of whom are present here today, who recommend that in order to better understand the place of Jewish women in society we must extend our study beyond the limited scope of prescribed religious behavior and include the broader spectrum of optional religious behaviors. I will show how Chasidic women are involved in the process of generating, disseminating, and perpetuating Chasidic and Jewish culture in Yiddish. My presentation will also illustrate how Chasidic women participate in a larger discursive process taking place in the United States at the end of the twentieth century in which their identity is produced, revised, represented, dispersed, perpetuated, and imposed.

*Od yoysef chai* was performed on Shushan Purim (the day after Purim), in 1978, by a group of Bobover Chasidic female teachers and students from the Bobover elementary school for girls, Bnos Zion, in Borough Park, Brooklyn. The event took place as part of the larger Bobover celebration of the holiday of Purim. In accordance with the Purim requirement to give charity, one of the main purposes of the event was to collect money for the school.

The performance and production of *Od yoysef*

*chai* by Bobover women is a modern phenomenon. In pre-World War II eastern Europe there were no Chasidic schools for girls. Today they are quite common, and Jewish topics are taught alongside non-Jewish topics. Before the beginning of professional theater in Hebrew and Yiddish, in the 1920s, Jewish women never participated in theatrical performances. Women were also excluded from the production of the *pirimshpil*, the Purim play, the most popular folk drama for Purim among Central and East European Jews since the sixteenth century and probably even earlier. Even though the Bobover Chasidim revived the *pirimshpil* tradition in the United States in 1948 as an integral part of their celebration of Purim, women have been excluded from the production and performance. They may, however, attend the event as part of the audience.

The performance of *Od yoysef chai* belongs to the category of optional and nonobligatory activities of the Bobover Chasidic court. The anthropologist Victor Turner ascribes such activities in the religious life of a superritualistic community in the modern world, such as the Bobover Chasidim, as liminoid. Located on the margins of the Bobover world, between the sacred world and the leisure-profane world, *Od yoysef chai*, like other liminoid rites and rituals, is less controlled and allows for more innovative and creative human expressions than the obligatory religious rites. Consequently, *Od yoysef chai* goes beyond the scope of the play and transcends into the arena of Chasidic women's voluntary self-expression. The fact that the event takes place on Purim, the most upside down of all Jewish festivals, further encourages and allows inversion of behavior, including the wearing of costumes and the dressing of girls in men's clothing. For the anthropologist-folklorist the performance of *Od yoysef chai*—and, especially, the fact that it is held in a public place—provides an entry into the lesser-known activities of Chasidic women.

Although the performance of *Od yoysef chai* is an independent and self-contained event, in its content and form it draws upon several cultural sources from Chasidic and non-Chasidic traditions, both old and new. The text of *Od yoysef chai* is based on the biblical book of Genesis, specifically on the story of Joseph and his brothers. Because of its universal themes of jealousy among brothers and of mother love (Rachel's love for Yoysef), this story is one of the most popular in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. The story has inspired the creation of folk and elite literatures and dramatic presentations. The story of Joseph and his brothers was one of the most popular themes of the *pirimshpiln* first performed in Germany, where evidence for its performance exists from the beginning of the eighteenth century. It was also one of the



most popular *pirimshpiln* in eastern Europe and was performed in many places up until World War II. The text of *Od yoysef chai* shares many similarities with the older texts of *pirimshpiln* on the same theme, texts called *Mekhiresh-yoysef* (The selling of Joseph) and *Yoysef-shpil* (The play of Joseph).

For its text, content, and performance styles, *Od yoysef chai* draws on the production and performance of the Bobover *pirimshpil*, held at midnight on Purim. It especially utilizes one *shpil*, the *Mekhiresh-yoysef shpil*. I have written in another article how the Bobover Chasidim have drawn upon the medieval *pirimshpil* to reconstruct, revise, and shape their own ritual for Purim. For the Bobover, the *pirimshpil* has assumed the role of obligatory ritual and has even been incorporated into the rebbe's *tish*, the rebbe's banquet held at midnight on Purim.

*Mekhiresh-yoysef* has a special place in Bobover religious beliefs and traditions. It was one of the most popular *pirimshpiln* in the pre-World War II Bobover repertory. The Bobover remember that several segments of the text and the music of the *Yoysef-shpil* were written by Ben Zion Halberstam, the previous Bobover rebbe, who perished in the Holocaust. In 1969 the *Yoysef-shpil* was revived in the United States. It has been performed in six different years since then. Because of its place in Bobover tradition prior to World War II and Halberstam's didactic text, the *Yoysef-shpil* has been incorporated into the curriculum of the fourth graders of the Bobover elementary school for girls, Bnos Zion. The play is now studied and performed annually in the school and attended mostly by women, but also by some men.

In the rest of the time allocated to me, I will show four selected vignettes from the video of the *shpil*, taken in 1978, which illustrate how the performance of *Od yoysef chai* reflects continuation and change in folk traditions in modern times. The play consists of four scenes: The first takes place in the home of Jacob, the Patriarch; the second in the fields where Joseph is looking for his brothers; the third in Rachel's Tomb; and the last scene in Pharaoh's court in Egypt.

As will be shown, although the text of *Od yoysef chai* draws extensively on the revived text of the pre-World War II Bobover *pirimshpil*, utilizing the same performance style and including music and dance, the women have embellished and rejuvenated the production to fit their own social and artistic needs.

The first vignette belongs to the preperformance segment of the event. In it the viewer looks at the setting, the arrangement of space, the activities before the play, the women in charge, and the place and role of the *rebetsn* (the rabbi's wife) in the event. It is in

this part that we hear from the teacher who was in charge of the production that the reason for the performance of this play is that it helps spread Jewish and Chasidic belief.

The second vignette also takes place before the beginning of the performance. Here the girls perform in a chorus line, an example of the women's innovative aspects of the production as well as their knowledge of the American stage.

The third vignette is from the beginning of the first scene of the play, with Jacob, the patriarch. Here is evidence of the similarities that *Od yoysef chai* shares with the traditional *pirimshpil* from eastern Europe and the Bobover *pirimshpil* in particular. When the curtain opens, Yekzel, Jacob's servant, who plays the role of the *payats*, the clown in the traditional *pirimshpil*, introduces the play. Following this are introduced all twelve of Jacob's sons, in the manner of the older *pirimshpiln*.

In the fourth vignette the viewer sees the last scene of the play, which take place in Pharaoh's court. Here once more is evidence of the women's creativity. The dancers in the court and the music accompanying them are unique to the women's play.

Despite their relative invisibility in this conference, with *Od yoysef chai*, the active Yiddish voices of Chasidic women can be heard loud and clear. Although the event which was the focus of this presentation, *Od yoysef chai*, was produced almost twenty years ago, versions of the play have been performed many times since 1978. Changes in the text and productions during the past twenty years will make an interesting study.

As was shown, Chasidic women are not marginalized as they have often been depicted by scholars. The performance of *Od yoysef chai* shows the power of traditional Jewish folk genre, the *pirimshpil*, and its resiliency and durability in the New World, where it has found new forms and meanings. Chasidic women have been able to draw upon the traditional *pirimshpil* to shape, express, and convey their identity as women in the modern world and at the same time fulfill an obligatory precept. By drawing on these traditions in the performance of *Od yoysef chai*, the Bobover women and girls not only continue these traditions in modern times, but also redefine them and shape them to fit their needs in a changing world.

I hope that in the future, at other conferences on Jewish women, Chasidic women can participate more fully and their own voices be heard (other than on the screen). There are many Chasidic women who can speak about the place of Yiddish in their life and what it means to be a Chasidic woman today. It is time to begin a dialogue. It will enrich us all.

## Women and Yiddish Literature: Some Historical Perspectives

Edith Samuels, Chair

Ellie Kellman

### WOMEN AS READERS OF SACRED AND SECULAR (YIDDISH) LITERATURE: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Discussions on the subject of women and Yiddish literature generally focus on the prose and poetry created by women during the last hundred years. In order to better understand the cultural conditions that led to a flowering of women's writing in Yiddish in our century, it is useful to examine the roles that Yiddish, in both its spoken and written forms, played in the lives of women for several centuries previous to the advent of modern Yiddish literature. My presentation this morning is a brief historical overview of the roles women have played as readers of Yiddish.

**Yiddish as women's language of prayer and study.** When we think of traditional Jewish life in the Old World, we usually associate Hebrew with study and prayer. However, for the most part, women were not taught to read and write Hebrew. For them, the language of study and prayer was Yiddish. So, although we usually think of Hebrew as the only sacred Jewish language, Yiddish actually functioned as such for many generations of our foremothers.

It's not easy to come up with an estimate of what percentage of Yiddish-speaking women could also read and write the language. We know that usually a few women in each community were literate in Hebrew and Yiddish. The essential role they played as religious functionaries is described in many memoirs. The *zogerke* (*firzogerin*, *zogerin*) was the central figure in women's prayer communities. *Zogerkes* were often daughters of rabbis. Since rabbis devoted themselves full time to the study of sacred texts, they were able to give their daughters the opportunity to study with them at home. Some chose to do so. *Zogerkes* were proficient in Hebrew and knew the liturgy very well. Sitting in the women's section of the synagogue, they would recite and translate the prayers in the *sider* for those women who were not literate, paraphrasing, embellishing, and interpreting the standard prayers and the Torah reading. Those who were able to would repeat the Hebrew prayers after the *zogerke*. She would also lead the women in saying *tkhines*, the supplementary Yiddish prayers that are partially recited from texts and partially improvised.

From the memoir literature that has come down to us, it is clear that *zogerkes* were active in eastern Europe well into the twentieth century. *Zogerkes* were present in immigrant communities in North America too. A woman I know in Toronto remembers a *zogerke*

at the McCaul Street *shul* there in the 1930s. The *zogerke* exemplifies women's creativity within the parameters of traditional Jewish culture, but the *zogerke* figure continues to fire the imagination of modern Yiddish writers too. For instance, in an article about the poet Rayzl Zhikhlinski, Yankev Glatstein describes Zhikhlinski as "one of the most interesting *zogerins* of Yiddish poetry."<sup>1</sup> In using the word *zogerin* to describe this highly original poet, Glatstein alludes to women's creative tradition of *zogn*, i.e., of expressing emotion through speech.

Several texts associated with women's prayer and study are bound up with the work of the *zogerke*. The *Korbn minkhe sider* formalized the oral tradition of the *zogerke*. First published in 1725, and containing a Yiddish translation and commentary on the whole liturgy, it became the standard *sider*. The *Tsene urene* (Come and see), by Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi, first appeared about 1590. It is an exegetical and interpretive rendering in Yiddish of the *khumes*, *haftores*, and *megiles*, interwoven with various tales, legends, and homilies. Written in a simple, lively style, it became immensely popular, especially with women readers, and has been published in hundreds of editions. It is still read both at home and in *shul* by Orthodox Jews today.

Even with the publication of prayers and sacred texts in Yiddish, *zogerkes* continued to give oral interpretations of the prayers and Bible readings in *shul*. The *zogerke's* role in interpreting the Torah portion was highly valued. Dora Shulner describes the *zogerke* Dvoyre in her *shtetl*, Radomishle, in the province of Kiev, around the turn of the century:

She was a tall stately woman, always neatly dressed. Her face was bright, as though the *shkhine* were present in her. She always wore a beautiful white silk kerchief that was tied behind her ears. Dvoyre the *zogerin* occupied an important place among us in Radomishle. All the women wanted to sit near her and would pay more for a seat in *shul*, as long as they were close enough to hear her read and recite the *tkhines* in *ivre-taytsh*. . .<sup>2</sup>

Although she was not an official *zogerke*, Chaim Grade's mother, Vele, retold Bible stories from the *taytsh-khumes* (Yiddish translation of the Torah) in her *shul* in Vilna so that nonliterate women could follow the Torah portion. She also read *agodes* (legends based on the stories in the Torah) for the women around her. This was very much an interpretive role, in which she was free to improvise. During Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services, women who could barely follow the text of the *sider* constantly asked her to find the place for them and, on those days at least, treated her with great respect.<sup>3</sup>

The memoir literature makes clear that the interpretive role of the *zogerke* was very important.

Women respected her for her ability to make the sacred texts accessible to them and express herself creatively in prayer. Her religious fervor was considered powerful by women and men alike, and her role as prayer leader was highly valued.

As described in many memoirs, during the month of Elul the *zogerke* was paid for offering prayers on behalf of others. People would visit the graves of family members and ask a deceased person, who was believed to be close to the Throne of Judgment, to beseech God to inscribe the living supplicant for a good year. This is known as *oysbetn a gut kvitl*. Since the *zogerke* could recite the prayers correctly and with fervor, a distinct spiritual power was imputed to her. Shmuel Lifshits describes the *zogerke* Ester-Khaye, from the town of Zabłudowe, in northeastern Poland, as she offers prayers of supplication on behalf of other women in her town.

At the beginning of the month of Elul, Ester-Khaye the *zogerin* [sayer] appears on the scene. All year she is hardly visible. She is a quiet, modest woman with a shrunken face, who always wears a kerchief on her head, summer and winter.

... Just at daybreak before the High Holy Days, this picture is to be seen: a large crowd of women, led by Ester-Khaye bearing her book of supplications, set off for the cemetery. The way to the graveyard is not far from town, and as Ester-Khaye enters, she feels at home, among people she knows. "Good morning, God," she begins in a tragic melody, "Your servant Ester-Khaye has come. . ." And approaching the grave, she looks over at the woman on whose behalf she is supplicating, and words begin to pour from her mouth as if from a spring.

First she calls out the name of the deceased person and strikes the gravestone three times with her hand, speaking as if to a living person: "Good morning to you, Rive-Mindl the daughter of Yankev-Tsvi. Your daughter Sore-Rivke has come, for she wants to see you and pour out her bitter heart before you. . . . Request, Rive-Mindl, a good year for your daughter, a kosher year, that she may know no ill, exert yourself for her sake. Why are you silent? Why do you not supplicate the Lord of the Universe?"

"It is five years since the wedding, and she is still (may we be preserved from harm!) a barren woman. Be not silent, Rive-Mindl. Sunder the heavens. . . ."

*Zogerkes* have also composed *tkhines*, voluntary supplicative prayers in Yiddish. Many *tkhines* are personal and are meant to be said privately, such as when a woman lights *shabes* candles or goes to the *mikve*, but some are to be said in the synagogue or as part of communal rituals such as visiting the graves of family members. *Tkhines* are sometimes improvised, but over

time a great many of them were written down and published.

The best-known composer of *tkhines* was Sure bas Tuvim, who was born in Satanov, in the Ukraine, in the early eighteenth century, and to whom the book *Tkhine shloyshe sheorim* (*Tkhine* of three gates) is attributed. She remains a mysterious figure, since there is no information about her life other than what she wrote about herself in her collection of *tkhines*. She was wealthy in her youth but became poor and was forced to become a wanderer. The texts of her *tkhines* show that she knew a certain amount of Hebrew and was familiar with various Yiddish adaptations of classical Jewish sources, leading scholars to speculate that Sure was a *zogerke*. The literary power of Sure's *tkhines* made *Tkhine shloyshe sheorim* so popular that for a hundred and fifty years after her death, male imitators continued to sign her name to *tkhines* they composed for publication. As a result of all this imitation, some scholars doubt that Sure bas Tuvim actually existed.

Chava Weissler has done extensive research on Sure bas Tuvim and has written that *Tkhine shloyshe sheorim* "interweaves autobiography, homely and 'womanly' concerns, and eschatological themes into one shining fabric."<sup>5</sup>

**Women as readers of secular literature in Yiddish.** The other important antecedent to women's writing in Yiddish in modern times is the lesser-known history of popular secular literature in Yiddish. From the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries, that is, up to the start of the modern period in Yiddish literature, readers of Yiddish had access to secular literature through transliterations of German texts into Yiddish and translations and adaptations into Yiddish of popular works of European origin. Works such as *Kinig Artus hof* (King Arthur's court); *Bove-bukh* or *Bove-mayse* (Book of Bovo or Story of Bovo), the title of the prose version of Elye Bokher's popular adaptation of the Italian romance *Bovo d'Antona*; and a Yiddish version of the Arabian Nights tales enjoyed enduring popularity.

Secular literature was frowned on by pious Jews throughout Ashkenaz. Attempts to discourage young people from reading romance literature have been documented beginning in the sixteenth century, but this activity likely began much earlier. Nonetheless, secular literature remained available to the Yiddish reading public throughout the premodern period (prenineteenth century), and played a singular role in the history of reading in the language.

After the advent of printing, readers of Yiddish were able to get access to many works of German popular literature through the older tradition of manuscript making. It was common practice for Jews to

purchase works printed in Latin script [known in Yiddish as *galkhes* (priests' language)] and pay a scribe to recopy them in Hebrew letters. Since Yiddish speakers can understand several dialects of German, these transcribed versions of German works were easily accessible.<sup>6</sup>

There are good reasons to assume that women were avid readers of secular literature in the premodern period. In the first extensive study of women as readers of Yiddish literature, published in 1913, Shmuel Niger pointed out that women's popular literature in the premodern period consisted mainly of Bible stories and *agodes* and that this narrative tradition had a considerable impact on the literary tastes of the female reading public.<sup>7</sup> While secular literature was read purely for the purpose of entertainment, the *Tsene urene* can be seen as having fulfilled a similar function for readers.

One indicator of the wide appeal to men and women of secular literature in Yiddish is that popular books of a pious nature were frequently published for the purpose of providing alternatives to the "foreign" imports. Their authors decried the popularity of secular works among the youth and opposed the publication and transcription of these works into Yiddish. In the introduction to a Yiddish translation of the *khumesh*, published in Konstans in 1544, the translator wrote the following: "This holy book is also good for the women and girls who, in general, can read Yiddish well, but waste their time on foolish books such as *Ditrikh fun Bern*, *Hildebrant*, and the like, which are of course nothing other than lies and invented things."<sup>8</sup> *Mayse-bukh* (Book of stories), a collection of folk tales and post-Talmudic legends, first published in 1602, was widely read for generations. Its compiler wrote that *Ditrikh fun Bern* and *Hildebrant* were pure filth, so it was a sin to read them at home on *shabes*, and concluded that if one wishes to entertain oneself by reading, one should read the *Mayse-bukh* instead.<sup>9</sup>

Yiddish folk etymology supplies an interesting bit of evidence that secular literature was assumed to appeal mainly to a female audience. The term *bobe-mayse* (grandmother's tale or old wives' tale), denoting a far-fetched story, is actually a transposition of *Bove-mayse*, mentioned earlier. The misogynous connotation of the phrase is that only women would believe the exotic tales found in secular romances such as *Bove-mayse*.

Khone Shmeruk concludes from the evidence he has gathered that (1) the practice of transcribing foreign texts into Yiddish was widespread and endured from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, and (2) both males and females were readers of these transliterations. Most provocative for our discussion is Shmeruk's conclusion that a large portion of the

Ashkenazic populace of both genders was literate in Yiddish during the premodern period.<sup>10</sup>

**Women as readers and writers in the nineteenth century.** During the nineteenth century, the number of women gaining literacy in Yiddish grew by leaps and bounds. Not only the daughters of scholars and the wealthy were taught to read and write, but middle- and working-class women as well.

The primary reason for this change was the advent of the Jewish Enlightenment movement, known in Yiddish as the *haskole*. The *haskole* originated in Germany in the last decades of the eighteenth century. By the forties and fifties of the nineteenth century it had spread eastward to engage the creative energies of Jews in Galicia, Poland, and Russia. Individualism, productive labor, and civil rights were the movement's basic values. At its core was the notion that Jewish life could only be improved through rationalistic education. Since it was the traditional Jewish language of study and prayer, Hebrew was seen as the ideal educational medium, but in reality only a tiny male elite knew Hebrew well enough to read it fluently. Thus, with great reluctance, some *maskilim* turned to Yiddish as the medium in which to propagate their ideas of social reform. Furthermore, the *maskilim* regarded women, who had not studied Jewish law, as potentially less opposed to cultural change than men. One important result of the strategy of propagating the *haskole* in Yiddish was that more children, especially girls, learned to read their mother tongue.

In her recent study of women readers in nineteenth-century eastern Europe, Iris Parush writes about women in scholarly Jewish families as agents of modernization. Such women had much more freedom to read than did men. "In a memoir of his youth in the Hasidic community of Strikov, near Lodz, Poland in the 1890's, Avrom Unger writes that he was taught to read and write Russian and Polish secretly by the rabbi's daughter, and that girls and young women participated avidly in the underground network of readers of Yiddish secular literature."<sup>12</sup>

We know from memoirs written by women who came of age in the 1880s (a generation, or two or three, ahead of many of the women writers whose works are being discussed at this conference) that it was a struggle for young women to obtain a formal secular education at that time. Ester Shekhter, born in 1867, author of *Di geshikhte fun mayn lebn* (The story of my life) writes that her father was a *maskil* who encouraged his daughter to study. But after his death, when Ester was 14, her mother put an abrupt end to her daughter's secular education. She writes: "My mother believed that a Jewish woman need only know how to pray and read the *tayish-khumesh*."<sup>13</sup>

Hinde Bergner, author of *In di lange vinternekht*

(During long winter nights), was born in 1870. Hinde's parents permitted her to study secular subjects as a teenager, but once her school program came to an end, her father expected her to apply her skill at mathematics to doing the accounts for his granary. Hinde's mother was alarmed that her daughter had learned to read German and Polish in school. Whenever she would find her daughter reading a German or Polish book, she would assume it was *treyf-posl* (a heretical book) and order Hinde to read the *Tsene urene* instead.

Opportunities available to working-class girls were much more limited. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, popular literature written in Yiddish was an important source of both entertainment and education for women (and men) who had no access to formal secular schooling. The earliest author of popular Yiddish literature to write for a mainly female audience was the Vilna *maskil* Ayzik Meyer Dik. In the 1850s, Dik began to publish short narrative works in Yiddish which were printed in a chapbook format and distributed widely by book peddlers. Dik believed in using popular fiction as a means of educating the Jewish masses about history, geography, science, and philosophy. Borrowing heavily from European, especially German, sources, and utilizing a variety of genres, Dik adapted his material to serve the didactic purposes of the *haskole*. He was a very good storyteller, and so, their educational aim notwithstanding, Dik's chapbooks were enormously successful as entertainment literature.

That the *maskilim* regarded women as important conduits for their ideas is clear from the following quotation from a manuscript cited by Shmuel Niger in his groundbreaking article *Di yidishe literatur un di lezerin* (Yiddish literature and the woman reader). Dik, who also wrote in Hebrew, assumed that women comprised the majority of his Yiddish readers. Addressing his women readers, he wrote that while men were generally suspicious of his Hebrew stories, assuming them to be *treyf-posl*, "Your heart, my dear reader, is still entirely free of distorted ideas. You do not exult in your scholarly, holy role. You will be an impartial judge of my books, and they will make a good impression on your delicate spirit. You will share [the ideas in my books] with your husband, and this will have an effect on him even if he hasn't read them himself."<sup>14</sup>

Another writer of popular literature in Yiddish during this period was Nokhem Meir Shaykevitch, known as Shomer. Shomer was an enormously prolific and successful writer of formulaic romances in Yiddish. Beginning in the early 1870s, he published hundreds of sentimental romances and melodramas in chapbook editions and newspaper serials. His novels have been regarded by most critics and scholars of Yiddish literature as unsophisticated, simplistic, *shund-literatur*. With the benefit of hindsight, howev-

er, scholars frequently credit Shomer with having cultivated the audience for modern Yiddish secular literature. It is a well-documented fact that both men and women read Shomer's novels. Critics have often written that Shomer's books appealed to those with limited education, but again memoirs provide documentation of middle-class, educated youth, male as well as female, also reading Shomer.<sup>15</sup>

During the same period in which Dik and Shomer were writing their popular books, Mendeley Sforim and Sholem Aleichem were beginning to write belles lettres in Yiddish. Women born in the 1880s, 1890s, and the first decade of the twentieth century came of age when Yiddish literature was in full flower. Much better educated and more worldly than their mothers had been, these women grew up in a world where secular literature in Yiddish was widely available. They read it avidly and some were inspired to make their own contributions to it.

**Editors' note:** Another text about a *zogerin* is the short story "The Zogerin," by Rokhl Brokhes, in Frieda Forman et al. eds., *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, Second Story Press, Toronto, 1994, pp. 85-90.

<sup>1</sup>Yankev Glatshteyn, "Rayzl Zhikhliniski," in *Af greyte temes* (in Yiddish), Farlag I. J. Peretz, Tel Aviv, 1967, p. 289.

<sup>2</sup>Dora Shulner, *Miltshin* (in Yiddish), n.p., Chicago, 1946, pp. 52-53.

<sup>3</sup>Chaim Grade, "Dos vayse tikhl" in *Der mames shabosim* (in Yiddish), Farlag I. J. Peretz, Tel Aviv, 1946, pp. 52-53.

<sup>4</sup>Shmuel Lifshits, "Ester-Khaye the Zogerin ('Sayer')," in *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry*, eds. and trans. Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, Schocken, New York, 1983, pp. 76-77.

<sup>5</sup>Chava Weissler, "Prayers in Yiddish and the Religious World of Ashkenazic Women," in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Judith Baskin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1991, p. 174.

<sup>6</sup>Khone Shmeruk, *Prokim fun der yidisher literatur-geshikhte* (in Yiddish), Farlag I. L. Peretz, Tel Aviv, 1988, p. 42.

<sup>7</sup>Shmuel Niger, "Di yidishe literatur un di lezerin," *Bleter geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur* (in Yiddish), Altvelt-lekher yidisher kultur-kongres, New York, 1959, pp. 54-61.

<sup>8</sup>Shmeruk, p. 43.

<sup>9</sup>Niger, p. 70.

<sup>10</sup>Shmeruk, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup>Iris Parush, "Readers in Cameo: Women Readers in Jewish Society of Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe," *Prooftexts*, vol. 14 (1994), pp. 1-23.

<sup>12</sup>Avrom Pinkhes Unger, "Di haskole farshpreyt zikh in shtetl," in *Mayn heymstetl Strikov* (in Yiddish), Farlag Arbeter-Ring, New York, 1957.

<sup>13</sup>Ester Shekhter, "Mayne kinder-yorn: Di geshikhte fun mayn lebn" (in Yiddish), offprint from *Dos yidishe vort*, Winnipeg, 1951, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup>Niger, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup>Rokhl Holtman, "Vos hot formirt mayn gedanken-gang?" *Mayn lebns-veg* (in Yiddish), p. 34.



Naomi Seidman

THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF THE HEBREW-YIDDISH  
"LANGUAGE WAR"

Eros and language mesh at every point. . . . [T]ogether they construe the grammar of being. —George Steiner, *After Babel*

The expression MAME-LOSHN ("mama-language") is a typical Yiddish compound of Slavic and Hebrew roots, connoting the warmth of the Jewish family, as symbolized by mama and her language, embracing and counteracting the father's awesome, learned Holy Tongue.  
—Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish*

In the last few decades, critics and historians have begun contesting and reevaluating the centrality of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's role in the revival of spoken Hebrew.<sup>1</sup> These critics argue, either explicitly or by implication, that the Hebrew revival actually occurred both much earlier and much later than the 1890s, when Ben-Yehuda was attempting to realize his project of raising a child to speak solely Hebrew. That is, Hebrew or *loshn-koydesh* was occasionally spoken in the centuries before the revival, by Jews from different communities who shared no other language, or by fervent Jews who wished to sanctify the Sabbath by speaking only the Holy Tongue. Moreover, the work of writers like Sh. Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele Mokher Sforim), whose Yiddish-inflected style infused written Hebrew with the idiomatic flexibility it had sorely lacked, had already begun to set the stage for a full-blown vernacular revival years before Ben-Yehuda's project was launched.

Nevertheless, neither the scattered episodes of Hebrew speech nor the fluency of Abramovitsh's Hebrew style directly produced a Hebrew-speaking environment, and Ben-Yehuda's experiment was no more successful. Hebrew finally did begin to become the vernacular of an entire society only during the Second Aliya (the wave of immigration that began in 1905 and lasted until 1914), under conditions very different from Ben-Yehuda's isolated work in Jerusalem of the 1880s. Benjamin Harshav is perhaps most responsible for the demystification of what has become an article of faith in Israel, Ben-Yehuda's "revival" of the Hebrew tongue. Harshav's revisionary linguistic history of the *yishuv* (which parallels recent historical approaches to many other aspects of pre-Statehood history) insists that "in spite of his pathetic figure and life, Ben-Yehuda had no real influence on the revival itself, which began to strike roots about twenty-five years after his arrival in Erets-Yisrael, in the milieu created by the Second Aliyah" (p. 84). Whatever one makes of his actual function in the Hebrew revival, however, it would be impossible to deny that Ben-Yehuda's position vis-à-vis modern Hebrew has attained the status of popular

national mythology.

The mythologizing of Ben-Yehuda's career begins with his own writings. In his autobiography, Ben-Yehuda describes the circumstances surrounding the birth of his son in the hushed tone of a witness to a miracle:

On the fifteenth of Av, the first new settlement of the *yishuv* [the Zionist community in Erets-Yisrael] was founded, the settlement of Rishon-l'tsiyon. On that very day, in a dark corner of a small room close to the Temple Mount, the child was born with whom the first experiment of reviving Hebrew as a spoken tongue was supposed to commence. . . . Is it not one of the wondrous events of human history that the beginning of the revival of our land, if one can call it that, and the beginning of the revival of our language happened simultaneously, on the same day, virtually at the same hour? On the day that the first settlement of the nation that had decided to return to the soil of their fathers was founded in the land of the fathers, on that very day was born the son who was destined to be the first of the children of the nation who would return to speaking the language of the fathers. (Ben-Yehuda 1978, pp. 9–10)

Ben-Yehuda's narrative employs the vocabulary of the miraculous, most markedly in noting the coincidence of the birth of the first Hebrew-speaking child with the founding of the first Hebrew settlement. The magical aspect of the birth is heightened in Ben-Yehuda's account by the child's appearance *ex nihilo*, as it were, an effect achieved partially by the mother's absence from the narrative. But the birth is translated from the biological not only to the supernatural sphere, but also to the realm of "human history," a history dominated here by fathers, the fatherland, and the language of the fathers. The word "fathers" (*avot*) is repeated three times in the last line cited above, as "land of the fathers" (*admat avot*), "country of the fathers" (*erets avot*) and "language of the fathers" (*loshn avot*)—the passage utterly avoids the myriad feminine topoi and literary conventions for describing Zion and the Land of Israel. The word *avot*, of course, could also be translated as "ancestors," but there are other elements of Ben-Yehuda's narrative, as related by himself and others, that suggest the importance of paternity to his Hebraist-Zionist project.

In describing Ben-Yehuda's place in the pantheon of Zionist heroes, Harshav conveys his sense that the myth of the Hebrew revival is inextricably intertwined with Ben-Yehuda's role as father:

Popular mythology feeds off of the image of a hero who personifies an idea, the individual who in his personal life, which is understood by all, and especially in his suffering and sacrifice, is a symbol of the exalted goal. Thus Herzl is con-

structed as a legendary king (although "Hibat Zion" preceded him); Bialik as the poet-prophet, who paid with his "blood and fat" for the blaze his verses struck in the people (although there were other first-rate poets among his peers, such as Tshernikhovsky and Steinberg); Trumpeldor as "the one-armed hero" (although he lost his hand defending Russia from the Japanese); Brenner as the personification of the "in-spite-it-all" (as if his assassination at the hands of Arab rioters justifies the despair in his writings); and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda as the father of the Hebrew revival, who sacrificed his family on its altar. (p. 84)

Harshav intends his catalogue to demonstrate the condensation and distortion by which the idiosyncrasies of individual life-stories are remade in the broad shapes of national ideas and values. Thus, the single-mindedness of Ben-Yehuda's lonely endeavor, his planting linguistic seeds in what could not have been very fertile ground, is encoded in the phrase "father of the Hebrew revival." And Ben-Yehuda's paternal role is not just a figure of speech. In account after account, the varied scope of Ben-Yehuda's linguistic experiment is primarily reduced to and expressed by his activities as father, rather than as editor, publisher, inventor of new words (or as his detractors would have it, manager of the Hebrew "word factory"), or founder of various language societies. The condensation of Ben-Yehuda's story differs from Harshav's other examples, however, because his heroism is both derived from and qualified by his fatherhood: popular mythological reworkings of Ben-Yehuda's career demonstrate not only the centrality of the family drama to the Hebrew revival, but also the degree to which this drama is touched with the psychological and ethical ambiguities of patriarchal (self-) sacrifice. While other stories about national heroes often suppress the less attractive characteristics of their subjects, Ben-Yehuda's problematic fatherly behavior almost always has a major part in the cultural texts that transmit his story. Rather than eliding Ben-Yehuda's "sacrifice" of his family, popular biographies, children's books, critical histories, etc. cite his zealotry and its domestic effects as further proof of Ben-Yehuda's laudably unswerving commitment to Hebrew, an enhancement rather than diminution of his heroic stature. What emerges in these narratives is a fable as morally complex as the binding of Isaac, an intertext to which Harshav's description of Ben-Yehuda's "sacrifice" of his family "on the altar" of the Hebrew revival indirectly refers.

My aim here, however, is not to judge either Ben-Yehuda's character or his role in the Hebrew "revival," nor to decide whether Ben-Yehuda's family troubles were the price he paid or exacted for the vernacularization of Hebrew. Rather, I will examine the

insistence with which the story of the revival of the Hebrew vernacular has been transmitted as a story about the conflicting claims of Jewish paternity and maternity, about the establishing of masculine control over areas of Jewish life traditionally in the hands of women, and about domesticity and guilt. The stories that have arisen around the figure of Ben-Yehuda, I would argue, have the cultural power they do because they reflect and reinforce basic conflicts of Hebrew and Erets-Yisraeli society during the inter-war period during which these myths began to circulate. Ben-Yehuda's family troubles/language obsession in fact encode and condense the overlapping territories of the language conflict and gender ideologies of his own and later times.

Let me draw the outlines of a few versions of what could be called the "primal scene" or the founding myth of the revival of Hebrew as a living tongue. In Ottoman Jerusalem of the 1880s, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, by supreme linguistic and ideological determination, raised the first native Hebrew speaker in modern times, his son Ben-Tsiyon (later Itamar). The experiment involved creating a "pure" Hebrew environment, severely restricting the child's access to other languages while immersing him in Hebrew speech. Ben-Yehuda relates that he taught his wife Hebrew quickly, even though this task "was a little hard at first." Ben-Yehuda goes on to explain this difficulty: "As with virtually all Jewish women, and everyone except for a few *maskilim* and Hebrew writers of the day, even this daughter of the *maskil* Sh. N. Yonas knew no Hebrew, although she could read the Hebrew letters and write Yiddish" (p. 83).

Most historians seem to agree that Dvora Ben-Yehuda learned Hebrew slowly, if at all. In one version of the story, published as an educational pamphlet by the Hebrew Language Academy, Ben-Yehuda is said to have forbidden his first wife to speak to their first-born until she could speak to him in Hebrew, a process that, according to this pamphlet, took Dvora Ben-Yehuda five years.<sup>3</sup> Ben-Yehuda, in having a willing wife, was luckier than at least one of the members of the Jerusalem group who had sworn allegiance to Ben-Yehuda's project. As Ben-Yehuda reports, "Arye Horwitz would argue with his wife incessantly because she didn't know Hebrew and didn't have time to learn" (p. 26). Despite the lack of such obvious discord in the Ben-Yehuda household, the difficulties of raising a child in a language one parent could only speak haltingly and the other barely at all seem to have taken their toll. Amos Elon summarizes the domestic manifestations of Ben-Yehuda's project in these words:

Ben-Yehuda's wife knew no Hebrew; while still on shipboard he told her that in Palestine they would speak nothing but Hebrew. He ruthlessly kept his vow. When his first son, Itamar, was born

(by a curious coincidence on the same day the colony of Rishon- L'tsiyon was founded) he became the first child in centuries to hear only Hebrew from both his parents and almost nothing from anyone else, for he was kept isolated from all human contact lest the purity of his Hebrew be spoiled by alien sounds. . . . It was a risky undertaking. The language was still archaic. Many words indispensable in modern intercourse were missing. The child had no playmates; until his third year he remained almost mute and often refused to utter a word. (p. 97)

In a later passage, Elon recounts that "when Ben-Yehuda's aged mother, who spoke no Hebrew, arrived in Palestine shortly before her death, Ben-Yehuda, who had not seen her for years, refused to talk with her in a language she could understand" (p. 110).

In her biography of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, Chemda Ben-Yehuda, who was Eliezer's second wife as well as Dvora Ben-Yehuda's younger sister, vividly describes Eliezer standing at the door to his wife's birth chamber and giving the midwife and the female neighbors a Hebrew language exam before he would let them in to attend the birth; one barren woman, believing she could benefit through sympathetic magic from proximity with the new mother, was allowed to enter—but on the condition that she not call out the prescribed phrase "this is my child," since she could not manage it in Hebrew. Chemda describes Dvora's efforts to silence the excited witness to the birth: "At every moment Sheyne-Malke wanted to say something loving to the new-born child in Zhargon. The mother, however, reminded her of the prohibition against speaking by putting her finger to her lips, and the woman remained silent. After that, we always called her the 'dumb aunt' (*hadodah ha'ilemet*)" (p. 13).

While Ben-Yehuda writes little about his wife's Hebrew-speaking abilities, passages in his memoir bear traces of his guilt for having sacrificed his wife to the cause; despite Dvora's frail health, Ben-Yehuda writes, he did not allow her a servant-girl for fear she would contaminate the pure Hebrew environment, an act of linguistic zealotry he later admitted had been unnecessary. In a long and apologetic passage, Ben-Yehuda defends his decision not to hire a maid-servant to help the new mother:

The new mother was naturally weak and sickly; poverty, pregnancy, and birth had weakened her further. But even so she willingly and good-naturedly agreed not to have a servant girl in the house, so that the child's ears would hear no sounds other than those of Hebrew. We were afraid of the walls of the house, afraid of the air in the room, lest it absorb the sounds of a foreign tongue emanating from the servant-girl, which would enter the child's ears and damage his

Hebrew hearing and the Hebrew words would not be absorbed as they should be and the child would not speak Hebrew. . . . This holy soul, who was destined to be the first Hebrew mother of the revival era which would give the nation a Hebrew-speaking generation, lovingly took upon herself the suffering of raising a child without even a little help, although she herself was weak and sickly. (p. 131)

Ben-Yehuda may have been making a reference to any one of these scenarios when he confessed that his determination to speak only Hebrew at times overrode ethical imperatives:

I speak Hebrew, only Hebrew, not only with the members of my household, but even with every man or woman whom I know to understand Hebrew to some degree, and I do not take care in this matter to abide by the laws of common respect or courtesy to women [*kibud nashim*]. I act in this with great rudeness, rudeness that has caused many people to hate me and has engendered much opposition to me in Erets-Yisrael. (p. 57)

If Dvora's Hebrew was limited, her husband's was not much better. One witness to the experiment reported that when Eliezer, for example, wanted Dvora to pour him a cup of coffee with sugar, he was at a loss to communicate words such as 'cup,' 'saucer,' 'pour,' 'spoon,' and so on. He would say to his wife, in effect: "Take such and such, and do like so, and bring me this and this, and I will drink." (*k'khi kakh, ve'asi kakh, vehavi'i li kakh, ve'eshteh*). (Fellman, p. 58)

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that Itamar Ben-Avi did not speak until he was four, as he relates in his memoirs. According to Ben-Avi, he spoke his first sentence in the following circumstances: Yehiel Mikhal Pines, a family friend, fearing the child would grow up to be retarded or deaf-mute, advised Dvora to speak to her child in a language other than Hebrew. She began singing Russian lullabies to him and was caught one day when her husband returned home unexpectedly. Itamar relates that the argument that followed caused "a great shock to pass over me, when I saw my father in his anger and my mother in her grief and tears, and the muteness was removed from my lips and speech came to my mouth" (p. 16).

Ben-Avi's "real" or imagined memory of the "primal scene" of the birth of Hebrew speech has disturbing similarities to the Freudian construction of the "primal scene," although in the case of Ben-Avi, the child's perception of the father's aggressive behavior toward his wife is anything but a misunderstanding. Itamar Ben-Avi, by connecting his first Hebrew words with both the rage of his father and the linguistic transgression of his mother, underlined the centrality of a parental and gender struggle in his own linguistic development. If we take all these accounts, including



Ben-Yehuda's idealized one, as a collective myth of the Hebrew revival, it seems clear that the mother's silence, self-sacrifice, and absence (or, alternatively, her transgression) are built into the mythical structure.

I am not, it should be noted, arguing against the sincerity of Ben-Yehuda's perceived need for such radical measures as the linguistic quarantine of the first Hebrew-speaking child from his mother, the midwife, or a servant girl. But neither do I think that the silence, or silencing, of these women during the primal scene of the birth of modern Hebrew speech is trivial, secondary, or accidental, whether one reads the scenes I outlined above as literal truth or as myth. Given Ashkenazic educational patterns, in which boys and girls learned Yiddish in their mother's arms, while boys were later introduced to Hebrew by their father or a male teacher—there is a certain logic to Ben-Yehuda's diverting this historical trajectory by prohibiting the speech of the child's mother. Moreover, Ben-Yehuda attempted to raise a child to speak Hebrew within the confines of the traditional Jewish family and in the larger setting of the old *yishuv*, with its conservative religious and social mores. The Hebrew revival finally succeeded under very different social and family circumstances, and its primary setting was not the home but the settlement school or its urban counterpart. As Harshav puts it, an important aspect of the Hebrew revolution was "the establishment of *social cells in a 'social desert'* (in Eretz-Yisrael) by groups of young people and children who cut themselves off from the chain of generations" (p. 113; emphasis in the original). In raising a Hebrew speaker within a traditional domestic Jewish environment, Ben-Yehuda may have had no choice but to substitute the paternal for the maternal role in the child's linguistic development.

Although Ben-Yehuda's experiment took place in an environment manifestly different from the ones in which the Hebrew revival eventually took hold (the Second Aliyah, the labor movement, Tel Aviv, and the settlements), Ben-Yehuda became the symbol of the revival primarily during this later period. While it is not surprising that the Hebrew revival would choose a hero for itself from an earlier period, I would argue that the narratives of Ben-Yehuda's life and vision served a particular purpose for later Hebraists. For one thing, Ben-Yehuda's domestic difficulties may well have proved the importance of combining a domestic and social revolution with the linguistic one. But Ben-Yehuda's experience also encoded some of the larger difficulties inherent in the Hebrew revival: what the Ben-Yehuda family drama exposes is that the Hebrew revival, and the Hebrew-Yiddish language war that ensued, was, on one level, the struggle between a "mother tongue" and a "father tongue." The

revival of Hebrew as the living language of an entire population and the concomitant suppression of other languages (primarily Yiddish) that was so central to this project were accomplished without the aid of a state apparatus such as the one that succeeded in destroying the Soviet Hebrew literary scene. Instead, the revival of spoken Hebrew called into service an array of deeply rooted Jewish desires, prejudices, and anxieties, including, I will argue, psychosexual ones. The first attempts at Hebrew speech, as we have seen, both involved the Jewish woman in a more central role than other nationalist projects and reduced that role to its biological minimum. The Hebrew revival also implicated Jewish women because it commonly (though not universally) saw its task as the suppression of the Yiddish language, with all its feminine associations. The growing Hebrew-speaking culture generated psychic momentum from actively stigmatizing what it saw as the womanly tongue. The revival operated in part according to what could be called a "politics of revulsion," that is, at least partially by tapping into a strong distaste for the disempowered *galut* (diaspora) existence that was often consciously or unconsciously perceived as having emasculated or feminized the Jewish collective; this distaste reflected itself, above all, in the rejection of the *mame-loshn* that both expressed and was the product of the objectionable Eastern European past.

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<sup>1</sup>Jack Fellman, for instance, writes:

It cannot be stated too emphatically, and contrary to the impression given by many articles, that Ben-Yehuda did not revive Hebrew either singlehandedly or otherwise, but rather, by his actions, he set the example to be followed by others. Moreover, Hebrew at the time was not a dead language that had to be artificially revived, but was, in fact, a flexible instrument of expression for many purposes, including even some topics of everyday conversation. . . . The linguistic situation before the revival,

especially among the Jews of Eastern Europe who had come to Palestine, was such that the speaking of Hebrew, once begun, was almost natural. (Fellman, p. 112-13)

Although Robert Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose* (University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1988), does not explicitly discuss Ben-Yehuda's role in the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, his study of the rise of Hebrew prose presents various ways in which Hebrew prose discovered or invented Hebrew style, idiom and vocabulary for their own purposes — before, during and after Ben-Yehuda's work. Alter traces these capacities to an educational system which could provide the basic tools for the creation of a realism "without vernacular," but which helped lay the groundwork for the vernacular revival. The linguist Paul Wexler would deny not only the centrality of Ben-Yehuda in the revival of Hebrew, but even the existence of such a phenomenon as the Hebrew revival. In *The Schizoid Nature of Modern Hebrew: A Slavic Language in Search of a Semitic Past* (Otto Harrassowitz, Weisbaden, 1990), he argues that Hebrew is a dialect of Yiddish with the Hebraic elements available to pre-"revival" Yiddish expanded and superimposed on the Yiddish syntactical structure: "It is imprecise to speak of a Yiddish 'impact' on Modern Hebrew, only of a Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew impact on Yiddish" (p. 18).

<sup>2</sup>Of course, the phrase "the father of the Hebrew revival" is the English, rather than the Hebrew term for Ben-Yehuda's role in reviving Hebrew. In Hebrew, he is called by the quasi-divine name of *mechaye hasafah*, the "reviver" of the language. Nevertheless, references to Ben-Yehuda's paternal role are ubiquitous in his own and in other writings on his contribution to the revival.

<sup>3</sup> "Eliezer Ben-Yehuda," Papers of the Hebrew Language Academy (Hebrew Language Academy, Jerusalem, 1970)

## Sheva Zucker

### THE FATHERS ON THE MOTHERS AND THE DAUGHTERS: WOMEN IN THE WORKS OF THE KLASIKERS/CLASSICAL WRITERS

It is commonly thought that the classic Yiddish writers, S. Y. Abramovich, Y. L. Peretz, and Sholem Aleichem, frequently portray women characters as shrews, hags, and *yentes* (vulgar, gossipy women). In her ground-breaking introduction to *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*,<sup>1</sup> Irena Klepfisz says that "the frequent negative depiction of women, especially those from the *shtetl* — wives, market women, unmarried women, as shrewish, conniving and gossipy — helped male writers to bond with male readers and to establish a male audience."<sup>2</sup> I agree with Klepfisz that the fathers of modern Yiddish literature sought to legitimize their work by tearing it from its women's roots as the *mame-loshn* and "creating a male literary dynasty." In establishing himself as the *eynikl* (grandchild) of the then only 52-year-old Shalom Jacob Abramovich [better known as Mendelev, whom he conferred the title *zeyde* (grandfather),

Sholem Aleichem single-handedly established this lineage.

I do not agree, however, with Klepfisz's assertion that these writers "treat women's experiences as trivial or fail to differentiate them from men's." She goes on to say: "Such a false 'universality' is present in classical Yiddish literature, which is dominated by male perspectives and concerns. To state the obvious: the classical writers wrote as *men*, often using first-person male narrators who presented the world and the women in it through men's eyes. . . ."<sup>3</sup>

The grandfather set the tone and content. I would argue that while one certainly can find examples of shrewish, conniving, gossipy women in the works of all three men,<sup>4</sup> there are, particularly in the writings of Peretz and Sholem Aleichem, a surprising number and range of female characters, and that these characters are generally treated with great sensitivity, insight, and, above all, compassion.

Certainly, when one looks at the corpus of Yiddish literature, one can detect significant differences between the writings of women and the writings of men. In many individual cases, however, one would be hard put to guess whether the author of a particular work is male or female. Moreover, in certain instances, some male authors have dealt with female characters with as much sympathy and understanding as many a female author.

Let's begin by looking at the works of the aforementioned Mendelev. In his writings, women are never the main protagonists but appear in secondary roles. Sometimes they are sweet, gentle, and eager to be educated and "enlightened" by the men they love, like Rokhele in *Eltern un kinder* (Parents and children) and sometimes, like Golde in *Dos kleyne mentshle* (The parasite), they are the saintly and unsuspecting victims of ruthless men. Most often, they are mothers and wives, overworked and burdened by the manifold cares of raising and supporting enormous families. Not surprisingly, the personalities of some women, both real and fictional, were not enhanced by such conditions. In *Masoyes Binyomin hashlishi* (The travels of Benjamin the Third), a Jewish Don Quixote, the wives of our hero Binyomin and his sidekick Senderl, who is referred to as Senderl *di yidene*, are examples of the negative stereotype.

Mendelev the narrator describes the "relationship" of Senderl and his wife in this way:

At home, Senderl did not lick any honey, poor thing. His wife wore the trousers, and he had a miserable, bitter portion. She used to keep him in terror, and would sometimes hit him, and he, poor thing, had to accept it. Before a holiday, she would have him whitewash the walls and would tie a kerchief under his beard. He would peel potatoes for her, roll out and shred noodles, stuff

fish, carry and put wood in the oven and heat it, just like a woman. That's why they called him Senderl the woman.<sup>5</sup>

It is true, as Irena Klepfisz writes in *Found Treasures*: "Though Benjamin and his friend Sender (demeaned by the nickname "Housewife") are fools, their wives are cruel stereotypes whose plight in the decaying social and economic world of the *shtetl* is never articulated, unlike the plight of the two anti-heroes" (p. 38).

Our sympathies are clearly with the men, but it is important to realize that Abramovich's criticism here, as in numerous other works of Yiddish literature, is aimed as much at the weak, ineffectual husband as at the shrewish wife. Both are a part of Jewish life which *haskala* (Jewish enlightenment) writers like Mendele sought to reform. They maintained that because of Jews' powerlessness vis-à-vis the larger community, the Jewish male himself was physically, economically, and emotionally emasculated. Taking refuge in his books and *luft* (air, unrealistic) schemes, the male placed a disproportionate burden on his wife, driving her, at times, to desperation. Small wonder then that the literature often depicts the weak, ineffectual Jewish male as wed to a complainer, nag, or even physical bully.

In his first novel, *Dos kleyne mentshele*, generally acknowledged as the first work of modern Yiddish Literature, Abramovich introduces a minor character, the *rebetsn*, who articulates an embryonic feminist point of view. Seeing Mendele the Bookseller, the *rebetsn* asks if he has any books for her, saying:

Men think that books only need to be printed for them. Everything is for them. As if women have no souls, aren't people and need nothing from this world, that it's enough for them if they live, get pregnant, bear children and raise them, cook dinner, take care of their husbands and suffer. . . . We had more than a few prophetesses and wise women in the olden times, . . . [and] even here in our city, you can count many wives whose husbands owe all their honor and riches to their [wives'] competence and cleverness. Even so, when it comes to city affairs or some other important thing, only the men who don't even know how to tie up a cat's tail, are consulted.<sup>6</sup>

When Reb Mendele offers her a *tkhine* in an effort to comfort her, the *rebetsn* says:

It's true, Reb Mendele, for us miserable women, only women's prayers [*tkhines*] will help, the only remedy for hearts full of sores and wounds. . . . But it hurts to see how the men, who don't understand, and don't want to understand, our hearts, how they laugh and mock our women's prayers and begrudge us this solitary remedy. If they would only sit in the women's

section once . . . and see . . . this one with a bitter lot from her husband, the other a desperate deserted wife [*agune*], the other with a difficult pregnancy, . . . another with swollen, burned hands from standing at the oven, . . . if they would only see how these unhappy, beaten down souls stand around the prayer leader [*zogerin*], lamenting, pleading, their eyes lifted, to the all-merciful Father in Heaven, . . . if they would only give some thought to it and see it with their own eyes, they would not dare open their mouths to mock the women's prayers [*tkhines*]. (pp. 78-79)

There can be no doubt that the sympathy of the author, the reader, and also of those assembled in the room is with the *rebetsn*. Her words move even the hero, a young man schooled in the arts of ruthlessness and exploitation.<sup>7</sup>

Many of Peretz's characters evoke similar feelings in the reader. Peretz neither "treats female experiences as trivial" nor presents "the world and the women in it through men's eyes." As Ruth Adler says in her study, *Women of the Shtetl: Through the Eyes of Y. L. Peretz*, "Peretz saw woman in her human essentials" (34). When he does portray a female character, and this happens not infrequently, he does so with as much compassion and sensitivity as any female writer.

Peretz illustrates, with great psychological insight and poignancy, the plight of poor young girls forced to marry against their will.<sup>8</sup> In his story *Khasene gehat* (Married), Leah, the narrator, is such a girl. Hoping to improve the family's lot through a "successful" marriage, Leah's parents arrange for her to wed her father's employer, Reb Zaynvele. The seventy-year-old miser has already sent three wives to an early grave. In dreaming of future prosperity, Leah's parents forget that according to Jewish folk belief, a man who has buried three wives is a *katlen* (murderer). Such a match exemplifies arranged marriage at its worst, blinding loving but desperate people to the wishes and well-being of their daughters.

To emphasize the unnaturalness of early marriage the author shows how Leah goes from playing children's games one day to being a *kale* (bride-to-be) the next. When Leah hears the news of her betrothal, she faints.

The boundaries between marriage and death become so obscured for her that she imagines her wedding procession as a death march and her husband as a corpse. Leah is repelled by Reb Zaynvele, but more than that, she is frightened lest she share the fate of his other wives. Yet Leah has no choice but to marry him. The engagement is presented to her as a fait accompli, demonstrating again her powerlessness in determining the single most important event in her life.

It would be difficult to imagine that anyone, male or female, could have written more compellingly and

convincingly about the evils of arranged marriage than did Peretz in this story.<sup>9</sup>

Irena Klepfisz grants that "of the three classical writers, Peretz openly championed 'the women's cause,'" but claims that he "never internalized it as a moral imperative" and that the issue is "conspicuously absent from much of his writing" (39). In my view, this is not the case. The "women's cause," in its broadest sense, is the stuff of so much of Peretz's work.

Again and again, in countless portraits of unfortunate women from various walks of Jewish life, Peretz cries out for reform. In *A kas fun a yidene* (A woman's wrath), he depicts the frustration and fury of a young wife whose husband neglects his family while hiding behind the mantle of piety. In *In post-vogn* (In the mail coach) he draws attention to the deep rift between male and female in traditional Jewish life, placing his sympathies clearly with the young wife whose churlish provincial husband cannot understand her desire to read and experience things beyond the narrow confines of their world. In *Di farshtoysene* (The outcast) he portrays the tragedy of a young woman who, having married a gentile, finds herself an exile in both the Jewish and non-Jewish world. The list goes on and on.<sup>10</sup>

I would argue that, at least in his writing, Peretz did take up the women's cause and saw improving the lot of women very much as a moral imperative. Nor is his stance unique among his colleagues; because many Yiddish writers were either *maskilim* in the early modern period or political radicals later on, and had themselves rebelled against traditional Jewish society, they chose to portray and even exaggerate the ills of Jewish life. Who could better be used to illustrate the need for reform in the Jewish community than the woman, the least powerful and most restricted member of that community, poorly educated, poorly treated, and consigned perpetually to perform the mundane tasks of everyday life.

Peretz generally depicts women as enablers or as victims of either their parents, their husbands, or greater Jewish society. Sympathetic as he is to their plight, his portrayal of women is, however, lacking in one area. As Ruth Adler points out: "Peretz, who portrayed woman in her variegated roles and psychological dimensions, failed to provide a literary niche for a description of the cultured independent type who in reality was not wholly unknown in the East European domain. One can at best hypothesize on some means of resolving the discrepancy" (p. 58).

It is indeed difficult to know why the emerging modern woman — the party member, the political activist, or the aspiring young writer — who was very much a part of Peretz's intellectual and cultural circle never finds a place in his fictional universe. To be fair,

it must be said that the equivalent male characters are also strikingly, although not totally, absent from his work. Peretz creates numerous male protagonists struggling to find meaning in a rapidly eroding way of life but rarely portrays men such as himself, Europeanized intellectuals who broke with traditional Judaism.<sup>11</sup>

Quintessentially modern as Peretz is in sensibility and spirit, Sholem Aleichem is the first Yiddish writer to portray the modern Jewish woman in fullness and depth. The term "modern" is not purely a chronological description. The word connotes a way of reacting to the reality in which one lives. I define the fictional woman as modern if she dares to question and/or revolt against the circumscribed roles of wife and mother to which society has relegated her. She has either ceased to accept the norms of her community without question or to link her destiny to a greater one prescribed by God. Her life is a constant struggle against the will of the community.

The modern heroine comes into Yiddish literature so late because she is only possible after the *haskole*, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the focus of literature shifts from society to the individual. The female presence, with its proverbial openness and psychological awareness, affords the writer the possibility of probing emotional depths not generally spoken of or explored in male characters of the *haskole* or even after.

Because the woman was the guardian of the Jewish home and the one in charge of the education of the children, she became the focal point for the conflict between modernity and tradition that is the very essence of modern Yiddish literature. No work so well illustrates the conflicts such a woman confronts between the communal and the private and between traditional Judaism and the alluring outside world that is the essence of modernity, as does Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye der milkhiker* (Tevye the milkman).<sup>12</sup> Nor does any other work show so well the price Jewish society pays for the freedom of its daughters.

Written over the course of fifteen years, the episodes of *Tevye* reflect the precarious position of traditional Judaism in a rapidly changing world. Each daughter marries a man whom she herself chooses, very consciously, but not intentionally, defying the wishes of her parents and the expectations of society. Tseytl, Hodl, Khave, and Shprintze place their personal desires above those of their parents and society; the dictates of God and Torah mean little to them. Unlike their father and his generation, they do not view the non-Jewish world with fear, but find it alluring and irresistible. Although Sholem Aleichem often portrays their rebellion sympathetically and even enticingly, he clearly shows that each step they take

toward modernity is also a step toward the inevitable demise of traditional Judaism. The daughters' choices—elopement, conversion, and suicide—are but metaphors for the fate of a people.

Understanding why Sholem Aleichem chose to give Tevye seven daughters and no sons will help us understand the symbolic role of women in this story and in a good deal of male-authored Yiddish literature written around this time. A partial answer may be found in the old Yiddish proverb which Tevye quotes, "*Az me hot tekhter fargeyt der gelekhter*" (Daughters to look after is no cause for laughter).<sup>13</sup> On one level, what could be worse for the poor man than to be "blessed" with seven daughters, each needing a dowry? On a more serious level, not having a *kadish* (son)<sup>14</sup> to carry on the family name and tradition posed an implicit threat to Jewish survival. The inadequacy of daughters is particularly striking and poignant when Tevye must hire a *kadish* to say the prayer for the dead for his wife, Golde.

Although Tevye is clearly the chief protagonist of the work, Sholem Aleichem uses the daughters to show how the changing times force themselves upon Jewish life. While the daughters are eager to enter a rapidly changing world, Golde, their mother, remains very much the traditional Jewish woman, devoting her life to the well-being of her family. She has a hard life as the mother of seven daughters and the wife of a poor man. The steady stream of curses and criticism she heaps on Tevye, which he dismisses as the nonsense of a "silly woman," are her only release. Following the traditional gender-based assignment of characteristics, Tevye, the dreamer and thinker, is counterbalanced and restrained by Golde, the doer and pragmatist.

While Golde is Tevye's opposite, the daughters function as extensions of him, taking those steps away from God and the tradition that his skepticism might have enjoyed but his piety never permitted. One has the sense that had Tevye been born a generation later, he would, like his daughters, have been drawn to the secular world. Faith and skepticism vie constantly within him. His involvement in his daughters' lives plunges him into situations which disturb his belief in the order and justice of God and His universe.

Despite their symbolic function, some of the daughters do emerge as independent personalities. Tseytl, the oldest daughter, who refuses to wed the wealthy butcher Leyzer-Wolf and insists on marrying her childhood sweetheart, the poor tailor Motl Kamzoil, is both traditional and revolutionary. She is eager to obey her parents but also insistent on her personal happiness. Her story is appropriately called *Hayntike kinder* (Today's children). While the author seems to support Tseytl's desire to marry for love, he

also shows how this new set of priorities signals the breakup of traditional Jewish society.

Tseytl's departure from tradition goes no further than choosing her own husband and, in so doing, crossing rather hazy class lines. She remains close to her family and to the Jewish way of life. In marrying a revolutionary, her sister Hodl, however, steps beyond into a very different world.

The third daughter, Khave, also thirsts for knowledge of the outside world. Significantly, Khave's friendship with Khvedke, a gentile, begins by their exchanging books. Tempted at first by the forbidden fruit of non-Jewish knowledge, Khave eats and loses her virtue and innocence, choosing to marry Khvedke and convert to Christianity. She, too, is exiled from her home to a world ultimately much harsher. Tevye and Golde have no choice but to sit *shiva* for her and mourn her as if she had died. Because her conversion also underscores Tevye's struggle with God, her story is more powerful than any of the other episodes. Later chapters, of necessity, portray more traditional and less dramatically compelling situations.

The fourth daughter, Shprintse, drowns herself because her rich sweetheart Aronchik is forbidden by his mother to wed beneath his station. The story of Beylke, the youngest daughter, continues the reversal of the action. Beylke reacts to the earlier chaos and upheaval by returning to tradition. While her sisters act with integrity and passion, Beylke consents to being married off by a matchmaker to the wealthy and boorish Podutser. But the old ways no longer work and Beylke is miserable. In sum, the paths the daughters take render the continuation of Jewish survival most tenuous; their stories embody the Jewish plight in a time of trial and transition.

Clearly, Tevye is an allegory in which the tragedy of a father almost totally bereft of his progeny becomes the tragedy of a people with no future. Sholem Aleichem employs female characters more as a vehicle for discussing the problems of Jewish continuity than to illuminate the plight of women.<sup>15</sup> In Tevye, Sholem Aleichem illustrates the profound loss resulting from the decline of traditional Jewish life while stressing its necessary inevitability. His attitude to this process is complex and ambiguous, and his portrayal of women, the catalysts of change in this text, reflects this ambivalence.<sup>16</sup>

Ironically, Sholem Aleichem shows the daughters' most attractive qualities—Tseytl's quiet romantic tenacity, Hodl's passion and revolutionary fervor, and Khave's single-minded quest for knowledge and experience outside her sphere—to be the very traits responsible for leading them off the prescribed path. While Sholem Aleichem clearly shows that their personal happiness is unattainable without these quali-



ties, he also recognizes that this happiness is secured at the expense of the family and, ultimately, of the Jewish people. The image of Tevye, patriarch of a large family, leaving the village of Anatevka after expulsion with only one of his seven daughters, makes a haunting and profound statement.

Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, and Abramovich all struggled with overwhelming national concerns, nothing less than the survival of the Jewish people despite assimilation, dislocation, and oppressive and sometimes virulent anti-Semitism. They dealt with these issues in different ways, and their portrayals of women reflect both these similarities and differences. Abramovich the *maskil* (enlightener) paints women more as types than as individuals, albeit at times with surprising insight and compassion, and sees the situation of women as but one of the ills of Jewish life desperately in need of reform. Peretz portrays women as individuals whose emotions and deeds are as worthy of political attention and of literary exploration as that of men. Finally, Sholem Aleichem creates multifaceted characters in ground-breaking, novel-length portrayals while moving beyond social reform to national allegory, a trend followed by later major Yiddish male writers as well.<sup>17</sup> Thus, while Sholem Aleichem's classical predecessors used the woman, who was less fortunate and more ill-used than her male counterpart, to emphasize the ills of Jewish life, for him and his successors the female protagonist becomes not a victim or a cause but a symbol.<sup>18</sup> Her fate becomes a metaphor for the fate of the Jewish people, and she becomes the focal point for the conflict between modernity and tradition which is the very essence of modern Yiddish literature. The heroine and her community come to represent the entire Jewish people, and her struggles, the struggles of her people.

<sup>17</sup>Irena Klepfisz, "Queens of Contradiction: A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Writers," in *Found Treasures*, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup>Similarly, Ruth Adler, in her study *Women of the Shtetl: Through the Eyes of Y. L. Peretz*, Associated University Presses, Cranbury, N.J., 1980, p. 34, says "... Mende and Sholem Aleichem tended to describe the wife as a scowling hag whose interest and activities are limited to her kitchen." She argues, however, that Peretz is not guilty of negative stereotyping.

<sup>19</sup>Klepfisz, p. 37 (author's emphasis). Occasionally, the narrators created by Yiddish male authors speak in a female voice. See, for example, Peretz's *Khasene gehat* or *Haisha mores khane* (The woman Mistress Hannah), in which Khane speaks in her own voice at the end. See also Sholem Aleichem's *Dos tepl* (The pot), a monologue narrated entirely by a woman.

<sup>20</sup>Although the claim that women are generally portrayed as scowling hags, gossips, connivers, or shrews in the works of the *klasikers* (classical Yiddish writers) is a gross oversimplification, it is also not without truth. For example, in

*Stempenyu*, Sholem Aleichem is very much concerned that his heroine, Rokhele the Beautiful, not become a *yidene* like her mother-in-law, with all the negative attributes this term connotes respecting married Jewish women. However, not all these portrayals are necessarily negative. Sholem Aleichem's wonderful monologue *Dos tepl* (The pot), which is narrated by a woman called Yente, whose very name means vulgar, gossipy woman, is a good case in point. The woman is definitely a pathological, nonstop talker, but the sensitive reader will see that, far from mocking her, Sholem Aleichem treats her with remarkable compassion and insight.

<sup>21</sup>S. Y. Abramovich, *Masoyes Binyomin hashlishi*, vol. 9, *Ale verk fun Mendele Moykher-Sforim* (Complete works of Mendele Moykher Sforim), Farlag Mendele, Warsaw, 1928, 27. This work has been translated into English as *The Travels and Adventures of Benjamin the Third*, trans. Moshe Spiegel, Schocken, New York, 1968. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

<sup>22</sup>S. Y. Abramovich, *Dos kleyne mentshele* (literally, "the little man," but translated by Gerald Stillman as *The Parasite*), vol. 2, *Ale verk*, 76.

<sup>23</sup>The protagonist, Itzhak-Avrom, says, "I have to admit that this was the first time in my life that I had occasion to think about the inferior situation of women, to understand what they were feeling, and to have pity on them. This, I thought, is the way a gentile, a good, educated gentile must feel when he starts to think about the condition of Jews, to value their worth and to feel badly about the troubles they, weak things, must endure from the nations of the world" (p. 79).

<sup>24</sup>Y. L. Peretz, *Khasene gehat*, vol. 2, *Di verk fun Y. L. Perets*, Farlag Idish, New York, 1920. An English translation titled "Married" is in Isaac Loeb Peretz, *Stories and Pictures by Isaac Loeb Peretz*, trans. Helena Frank, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1947.

<sup>25</sup>The pathos and suffering of the heroine call to mind Esther Singer Kreitman's wonderful depiction of a similar theme in her autobiographical novel *A sheydim tants* (A dance of devils), available in English translation under the title *Deborah*.

<sup>26</sup>The story *Sholem bayis* provides a refreshing antidote to all these stories dealing with the frustration and anger of women in miserable and oppressive situations. Although the couple here is as poor as that in *A kas fun a yidene*, this story focuses on the beauty of married life when blessed with mutual love, respect, and the sharing of burdens and joys.

<sup>27</sup>See the stories *Mayses* (Stories) and *In post-vogn*, both available in translation in *The I. L. Peretz Reader*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse, Schocken, New York, 1990, for such a character. In both cases the author-narrator, an assimilated Jewish writer, raised in a very different, more traditional atmosphere, is clearly Peretz in thinly disguised form.

<sup>28</sup>For a more detailed analysis of the subject, see my article, "Tevye and His Women," in *Shofar: an Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, v. 10, no. 4 (Summer 1993).

<sup>29</sup>Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye der milkhiker* (Tevye the milkman), vol. 2, *Musterverk fun der yidisher literatur* (Masterworks of Yiddish literature), YIVO, Buenos Aires, 1966, p. 36. All quotations from *Tevye* are from this edition.

<sup>30</sup>The term *kadish* is used to mean "son" in Yiddish because sons and not daughters have the responsibility of saying *kaddish* (the prayer for the dead) for their parents. It was,

therefore, up to the sons to keep the memory of the parents alive. Furthermore, in Judaism, since a man "takes" a wife and a woman is "given" in marriage, it is more likely that women accommodate to the world of their husbands than vice versa. This is definitely true of Tevye's daughters.

<sup>15</sup>Similarly, in *Stempenyu*, which offers the first novel-length portrayal of a female protagonist in Yiddish literature, the national allegory is of primary importance although individual characters, particularly the heroine, Rokhele, are vividly drawn.

<sup>16</sup>Despite his own somewhat secular orientation, Sholem Aleichem, like many Yiddish writers, concerned himself with the continuity of traditional Jewish life. It was as if he knew that the freedom which allowed him to write in Yiddish (something that stringent Orthodoxy did not allow) also threatened the future of the language and the nation that spoke it. Although he and his heroines were lured by the new freedom, he could not present it without ambivalence. He knew that the same freedom that allowed the daughters to follow the dictates of their hearts and not those of Jewish society would also lead to the inevitable demise of traditional Jewish society, a tradition at once oppressive and beautiful.

<sup>17</sup>See, for example, Dovid Bergelson's *Nokh alemen* (When all is said and done) or Yoysef Opatoshu's *Aleyn* (Alone).

<sup>18</sup>It is interesting to note that while male authors created female characters who frequently functioned as symbols and archetypes, women created protagonists struggling to be individuals in a world that assigned them a common destiny.

## Women and Translation

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### YIDDISH TRANSLATION: FEMINIST CONCERNS

We are all familiar with the conventional view, in which a translation is considered a secondary work, dependent on and subservient to the original text. One cliché, proclaiming that "only one syllable differentiates a translator from a traitor," puns on the Italian words *traduttore* (translator) and *traditore* (traitor) both masculine. The pun warns what a treacherous occupation translating is, for a mere slip of the pen can transform the whole effort of transporting a text from one language to another into a betrayal that reaches out from a single word to infect the entire culture. It seems significant that this pun works only in the masculine formation and, even more so, that my 1978 pocket-sized Barnes & Noble English-Italian/Italian-English dictionary, which gives as the feminine of "traitor," *traditrice*, offers no feminine form for "translator." Is the tourist more likely to encounter a "traitress" than a woman translator?

The cliché, in the context of the dictionary's omission, suggests how pervasively gendered are our assumptions about translation (and also about translators and writers). This gendered notion becomes

explicit in yet another truism: "A literal translation is plodding, like a faithful wife, and a literary translation is free, like a loose woman." Likening a translation to a woman, this statement assumes, first, that an original text is like a man and, second, that the relationship between a text and its translation is like a hierarchical relationship between a man and a woman. In this textual or sexual relationship, the original text, equated to the man, determines a tyrannical dualism which defines a translation (or a woman) as either literal or literary, tedious or thrilling, domestic or dangerous, too faithful or too free. As in the age-old paradox that binds women into the roles of Virgin and Whore, a translation, like a woman, can never achieve an appropriate balance. Thus, a translation is an imperfect female version of the male original.

We find a prototype for this notion in the second story of creation (Genesis 2:5-23), where God translates doubly: The Creator carries across the breath of life by transforming dust into a man, and then the man's rib into a woman. When the man proclaims, "She shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man," his derivative naming of the woman (*isha* from *ish*; "woman" from "man") creates the assumptions about translation upon which the clichés are based.<sup>1</sup> What the clichés do not acknowledge is that translation is transformation, as much the "changing of forms" as the "carrying across" from one language to another. The act of translating creates a text that is something "other," that lives on its own terms.

In this talk, I want to dispute such conventions and hierarchies of text and of gender by speaking from my experience as a reader, a teacher, a scholar, and a translator of Yiddish poetry, especially Yiddish poetry by women. At the center of my argument is my belief that the act of translating is the supreme art of making choices. The translator must constantly negotiate between risk and compromise, originality and collaboration, individuality and community. Translation, though, transcends the dualism of these paired opposites. Rather than choosing to be either faithful or free, either a patriot or a traitor, the translator must create more terms, shape other terms, rearrange old terms. By selecting, modifying, combining, and recasting these terms, the translator will transform a poem embedded in one language and culture into a different poem in a second language. This new text might appear to replace the original. In fact, though, each translation continually converses with its original, for the original does not vanish, but shimmers beneath the second language. A fluid interpretation, the translation talks. Rereading, answering, querying, it keeps the text in motion.

Drawing on my own translations of Yiddish poetry, I would like to discuss some of the ways that a

translator whose frames of reference include feminism makes choices. Let me make clear my assumption that every translator is first of all a reader and that every reader comes to a text from within a context. Just as every reading is shaped by the intellectual, ideological, emotional, and aesthetic perspectives of the reader; so every translation is shaped by the translator's context, whether that is explicitly acknowledged or not.

Over the past ten years, I have been engaged in a project of translating Yiddish poetry by women, a project that has taken a variety of forms: from a selection of poems by Malka Heifetz Tussman in Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav's 1986 anthology (*American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, University of California Press) to a just-completed book, *Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky*, to my work-in-progress, "Anthology of Women Yiddish Poets." Although I had translated Yiddish poems by women since 1976, when I began my friendship and studies with Malka Heifetz Tussman, the feminist framework for this project took form only in 1985, when I drafted both my article, "A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish," which dealt with Ezra Korman's 1928 anthology *Yidishe dikhterins* (Yiddish women poets) and a translation of Kadya Molodowsky's 1927 book, *Kheshyndike nekht* (Nights of Heshvan).

Reading reviews in the Yiddish press, finding poems by women in journals and newspapers, reviewing Yiddish anthologies and the anthologies of Yiddish poetry in translation, I realized that women poets in Yiddish had been sparsely represented, only partially heard, and received with prejudice. It seemed necessary, even urgent, to bring to light, that is, to read, write about, and translate as much Yiddish poetry by as many women as possible in order to see what was there, to define and examine the tradition or traditions of writing in which women were engaged.

But I did not know how exactly to proceed. How would I choose the poets to translate? Which poems would I choose to translate? In retrospect, I realize that I was then defining for myself the problems of translating as a feminist. To translate as a feminist means that a set of values or principles based on an awareness and analysis of gender informs the framework that the translator uses to make those choices. Because a translator weighs her choices according to her perceptions of how language is used in a cultural context, a feminist translator continually tests the weight that gender adds to the cultural balance.

From the time I wrote my doctoral thesis on Moyshe-Leyb Halpern — a dissertation that included a verse translation of his book, *In nyu york* (In New York), and a critical reading of that work — I had felt strongly that the best way to represent a Yiddish poet

in English was through a complete translation of the poet's work.<sup>2</sup> It seemed to me, then, that completeness provided a context that was more important than selecting the "best" or perhaps the "most translatable" of the poems to represent the poet. Yiddish poetry was new to me then, and I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the literature and by the immense silence and indifference that surrounded it both in the university where I was studying and in the books I was reading.

Translating Halpern, with Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Yeats ringing in my ears, I began to question the values of "good" and "bad" poetry with which my professors had inculcated me. Halpern's poems did not fit neatly into these categories. What was good, strong, and clear to me in his poems had a different quality. The "hard" modernist disdain for the "sentimental" and the "soft" in poetry did not really work with Halpern's poems — the poems did not fit into these categories of taste.

The problem became greater when, four years later, I began to work on women poets. On the one hand, I felt an urgency to carry over into English as many female voices as possible. But on the other hand, there were so many voices — seventy in Korman's anthology, more than a hundred in the card catalog at YIVO — that I did not know where to start. To translate one or two poems by unknown poets seemed pointless. Korman's 1928 anthology — the only collection of Yiddish poems by women — was an early selection of poets and hardly complete or representative of what had been published in the subsequent decades. Malka Heifetz Tussman was not included there. (She had told me that she'd refused to send Korman poems, disliking the idea of being grouped with only women poets.) Kadya Molodowsky's poems in this collection are a small, variant sample from her first book; she still had her career before her. How could I trust Korman's selection without first knowing the body of works from which he had selected? Which of Molodowsky's poems would Korman have chosen if he'd published the anthology forty years later?

I took a double approach. On the one hand, I was determined to translate all of Molodowsky's poetry in order to find her "best" poems. I wanted to do the same for Tussman's poetry, too, but I could not do both poets at once, and I also decided to step aside when Marcia Falk reactivated her work on Tussman. On the other hand, I wanted to contextualize Molodowsky's and Tussman's work in the larger range of poems by many women. These were some of the questions that arose and on which I am still working: Was there a tradition of women poets to be found? How did women read each other's poetry? What were the connections between poems by women and poems



by men? How did poems by women fit into the contemporary poetic movements of politics, aesthetics, modernism? What was the relationship of poems by women to the Yiddish devotional literature for women, which had shaped the lives of these poets' mothers and grandmothers?

Translating as a feminist, one first confronts the problem of canon and how to choose which poets to translate. The first criterion might be quality. But in an uncharted, uncanonized body of works that were marginal in their own culture, the translator may not know which poets are "good." In such a case, the translator must reconsider what constitutes a "good" poet and construct a context for that poet and her work. According to the Poundian, modernist values of poetry that informed my graduate education in the late 1970s, a good poem was made of concrete rather than abstract language, avoided wordiness and poeticism, was exact, concise, focused, imagistic rather than discursive, witty, antisentimental. Every word was *le mot juste*, the right word. Conventions and clichés or dead metaphors were evoked intentionally, in order to subvert or crack open the accepted and revivify the language of ordinary speech. Allusions and quotations drew the poem into a dialogue with the great Western tradition—with Homer, "The Seafarer," the French troubadour poets, Dante, the French symbolists, the English Renaissance poets—as well as the ancient Chinese poets.

As a translator steeped in these values, I had to find a different way to read the wordy poems filled with abstractions, such as Roza Goldshteyn's *Di yudishe muze* [sic] (The Jewish muse) or *Zikhroynes shel pey-sekh* (Memories of Passover) or Yehudis's *Breyte himlen* (Ample heavens). From a modernist perspective, these poems are not "good." Nonetheless, they show us how women at the end of the nineteenth century, engaging in politics on the page and in the street, recast the poeticisms of the Labor Poets. These poems merit a translation that conveys their energetic syntax and spirit.

Thus, I have learned to read beyond the misconception that labels Miriam Ulinover's deliberately archaic diction in 1922 as naively folklorist. Ulinover's poems demand from the translator a diction and a tone in English that correspond to the dialogue between a modern poet and the folk source of her poetry. The translator must not be afraid of the so-called sentimentality in Roza Yakubovitch's dramatic monologues of the Matriarchs and Hagar or her poem in the voice of a pregnant widow, for each of these poems tells a story of childbearing, love, and empowerment from a point of view not heard elsewhere in Yiddish poetry. As her translator, I have recast my own sense of metaphor to accommodate Molodowsky's slippery, compounded, ever-evolving metaphors—the "pure blood" of the

grandmothers' lineage that binds the brain like silken thread, a pair of buzzing, old spectacles, a tattered flag devedined like a piece of meat.

These poems, like many Yiddish poems by men, speak powerfully, yet do not conform to the standards of good, modern verse in English. A critical consensus of poetic quality is defined as much by unacknowledged assumptions about gender as by explicit debates about language, aesthetics, philosophy, psychology, and politics. From such consensus comes the paternalistic assumptions and delimiting assertions about *froyen-lyrik* (women's lyrics; female poetry) in essays and reviews, in the mid-1910s and on into the 1920s, by Shmuel Niger, Melekh Ravitch, and A. Glanz. Such consensus has also shaped the selection of women poets and their poems in the influential translation anthologies of Yiddish poetry from the mid-1980s.

In my current project, "Anthology of Women Yiddish Poets," I translate as a feminist in that I try to render the poems that don't "fit" into a modernist aesthetic, that aren't necessarily "good" according to poetic convention, that are deeply embedded in particularities of Eastern European Jewish life, because unexpectedly, in what some might call sentimental and clichéd or obscure, I often find the strength of women's voices. I find poems that embody sexuality and sensuality, poems that speak about power and powerlessness through images of pregnancy, childlessness, childbirth, child-rearing, widowhood, orphanhood. I find poems that express anxiety about aging, poems that interpret or refer to other poems, poems that pray, poems that connect the poet to or cut her off from her people.

Translating as a feminist, then, I revise my notions of canon and literary taste. For an anthology, though, a translator must select poets and poems. In making selections, the translator necessarily, if inadvertently, forms an alternative canon and its determinism of different literary standards. Ideally, the translator will acknowledge that her canon, like all canons, excludes as well as includes, that it represents a partial view of the literature, and that another translator or reader may revise or overturn it.

In selecting for an anthology, the translator must weigh the choices: to represent only poets who have not been translated at all; to include poets who have been well-translated, but to pick only poems that have never appeared in translation before; to retranslate poems. It seems important, especially for Yiddish, that, along with translations of unknown poets and poems, more than one translation of a poet and a poem should exist. Celia Dropkin, for example, has been represented, in four English anthologies published between 1969 and 1989, by a total of nine poems, including two translations of *Di tsirkus-dame* (The

circus lady). Then, in 1994, a splendid, book-length translation of Dropkin's poems appeared in French.<sup>3</sup> In the words of her French translators, Gilles Rozier and Vivianne Siman, the English translations, by Adrienne Rich, Grace Schulman, Howard Schwartz, and Aaron Kramer, while fine and various, only begin to "present the different facets, the different registers" of Celia Dropkin's poetry.<sup>4</sup> More translations of the same poems and translations of yet-unrendered poems provide multiple voices that can open up the Yiddish texts. With multiple translations, students who read Yiddish literature only in translation will have to work harder to get at the poem. Multiple translations help readers return to the Yiddish text or turn to someone who has access to it. At this time, when there are relatively few readers of Yiddish, there is a great need to open the field, to open the discussion of Yiddish literature through translations. Let us not close off a Yiddish text in a "definitive" translation. Let us not condemn translators as traitors. Rather, let us strengthen the fluid, reciprocal conversation between Yiddish poems and English poems.

<sup>1</sup>Genesis 2:23, *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1955.

<sup>2</sup>Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, *In New York: A Selection*, trans., ed., intro. Kathryn Hellerstein, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1982.

<sup>3</sup>Celia Dropkin in English anthologies: Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds., *Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, Schocken, New York, 1969, 1972, pp. 168-69: "Poem (You sowed in me, not a child)" and "Poem (I haven't yet seen you/asleep)," trans. Adrienne Rich; Howard Schwartz and Anthony Rudolph, eds., *Voices Within the Ark*, Avon, New York, 1980, 252: "A Circus Dancer," trans. Howard Schwartz; Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, Khone Shmeruk, eds., *Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, Penguin, New York, 1987, pp. 241-45: "The Circus Dancer," "Adam," "The Filth of Your Suspicion," "Like Snow on the Alps," trans. Grace Schulman; Aaron Kramer, *A Century of Yiddish Poetry*, Cornwall, Cranbury, N.J., 1989, pp. 139-40: "At the Window" and excerpts from "My Guest" ("You're welcome. . ." and "You are a spider, I a fly"). In addition, the poem *A moyre iz gevaksn in mayn harts* (A fear grew in my heart) appeared in *Bridges* (Fall 1994) and a French-Yiddish collection is now available as well: Celia Dropkin, *Dans le vent chaud: Bilingue yiddish-français* (In the hot wind: bilingual Yiddish and French), trans. Gilles Rozier and Vivianne Siman, Editions l'Harmattan, Paris, 1994.

<sup>4</sup>Rozier and Siman, "Introduction," *Dans le vent chaud*, p. 14.

## Goldie Morgentaler

### TRANSLATING MICHEL TREMBLAY'S *LES BELLES-SOEURS* INTO YIDDISH<sup>1</sup>

I was asked to speak to you today about translating from French into Yiddish, so I will begin by warning you that translators are great complainers. We

have a tendency to be insecure, uncertain about our place in the literary firmament, stepchildren and trespassers in the field of literary activity. Translation does not fall into the same category as other literary endeavors. Unlike essayists, novelists, poets, or even journalists, all of whom use their own words to evoke particular realities on paper, translators are never originators, the texts they deal with are not their own, and the types of linguistic problems that they encounter remain private and hidden.

The ideal translation must achieve several impossible things at once: It must be true to the original, both linguistically and atmospherically, and it must read as if it had been written in the language into which it has been translated. A translation must never call attention to itself as a translation, and the translator's greatest burden is to give the impression that she does not exist, that there is no mediator between writer and reader, or playwright and audience — and this despite the fact that, as the Jewish maxim has it, "all translation is commentary."

Yet, despite these obstacles, it must be said that there is great pleasure in being a translator, because the truth is that while translators do not create their own texts, they do nevertheless create something, and that something is that to give a literary work existence in a language and a culture in which it was previously unknown. Bridging the linguistic divide can be both infuriating and exhilarating — infuriating when the equivalent words or phrases do not exist in the language into which one is translating, exhilarating when a legitimate substitution comes to mind. Translation is an impassioned search for *le mot juste* (the right word) at the same time that it is the art of conveying meaning through approximation.

In the particular case that I will be discussing today, that of translating into Yiddish the play *Les Belles-Sœurs* by the French-Canadian playwright Michel Tremblay, I suddenly found myself able to do the impossible, namely, to speak French in Yiddish, by which I mean that in transposing Tremblay's sentences into idiomatic Yiddish, I could recreate the atmosphere of the original in a language in which it had never existed.

And here I would like to tell you a little bit about myself and how it was that I came to translate this classic Quebecois play with all its linguistic idiosyncrasies into that other most idiosyncratic language — Yiddish.

I was born in Montreal, where I grew up speaking Yiddish, which was the language of my home, until I went to grade school, where, of course, I learned English. English quickly became, and still is, the language in which I live my life, and in this I am typical of the majority of Montreal Jews. Later on, I learned

French as well, and I was especially fortunate in that I learned much of my French from French-Canadian friends, so that when I came to tackle Tremblay's text, I was not entirely flummoxed by his use of the French-Canadian patois known as Joul.

But I never entirely forgot my Yiddish, although it stopped being the language of my day-to-day life; and in this, too, the fact of my being a Montrealer played a part. Unlike most North American cities, Montreal managed to preserve its Yiddish heritage, to institutionalize it, and to offer some organizational backing to a language which in most other places has disappeared altogether. I suspect that part of the reason for this is the linguistic duality of the city. With the French and the English dividing the city between them, total assimilation to one or the other was impossible.

As you know, Yiddish is the product of the remarkable culture of East European Jewry, a culture that is reflected in its literature. Unhappily, this literature is in danger of being lost, even to those who are its rightful heirs, the Jews of today, because they can no longer understand the language in which it was written. Obviously, the only solution for a language with few speakers and readers is translation. It is not a good solution, because the cliché that says that things get lost in translation is sadly true. Translation may not be a perfect solution, but it is the only one possible when there is no other means of rescue. That is why I became a translator. It was a sense of mission that prompted me, the impulse of the white knight — or, in my case, knightess — to pluck that fragile waif of a language from the threatening jaws of imminent oblivion. I wanted Yiddish literature to survive, no matter how imperfectly. Which is why I have, for the most part, translated from Yiddish into English.

It is only when one engages in translation that one becomes aware of how fragile and inadequate a solution it is. This is especially true for Yiddish because, in addition to the usual problem of phrases and expressions that have no exact equivalent in English (a problem that exists in all transpositions from one language to another), there are also concepts and traditions encoded into Yiddish that are particular to Judaism and these are nearly impossible to translate. But if this causes a problem in translating from Yiddish into a non-Jewish language, it causes no less of a problem if one is going the opposite way — from a non-Jewish language, like French, into Yiddish. This is my round-about way of introducing Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-Soeurs*, which means "the sisters-in-law" in English and becomes *di shvegerins* in Yiddish.

As you may know, tomorrow [October 30, 1995],<sup>2</sup> the French-speaking province of Quebec holds a referendum to decide whether or not it wants to remain a part of English-speaking Canada. Michel Tremblay's

play, produced in Montreal in 1965, is generally considered one of the first cultural manifestations of the Quebec nationalism that prompted tomorrow's referendum, the more so because it was written entirely in Joul, the French-Canadian dialect.

The play quickly became a Canadian classic both in French and in English translation, and went on from there to become an international success, being translated into several languages, including Scots Gaelic. But before proceeding further, let me give a quick summary of the plot. Germaine Lauzon, a middle-aged housewife, has just won a million trading stamps. She invites all her female relatives and friends to a stamp-licking party, at which they will help her to paste the stamps into their booklets. (I should add here that the play has fifteen characters, and all of them are women.)

During the course of the evening, the women chat with one another or address the audience directly, revealing something of their personalities and a great deal about the impoverished and rather hopeless lives they lead. As the evening wears on, the initial veneer of politeness fades away, and the women grow ever more vicious toward one another. At the same time, they also help themselves to Germaine's trading stamps, so that by the end of the play, Germaine, the only one of the group ever to have won anything, is left with nothing.

*Les Belles-Soeurs* is obsessively concerned with the relationship between chance and poverty. The women are always looking to get rich through wind-falls. They are always entering contests where winning depends on luck. They send away answers to newspaper charades, radio games, riddles, and guessing games of all types: think up the slogan, guess the mystery voice. They are mad about bingo, and their despairingly repeated refrain is, "Do I look like someone who has ever won anything?" What's more, when one of them does win, as Germaine does with her million trading stamps, the others cannot tolerate her good fortune and proceed to rob her of her winnings, so that she can revert to being a loser like themselves.

It is a bleak portrayal of human nature, but the bleakness is relieved by a great deal of humor and pathos. It is not at all difficult to identify with these women or to understand them or to feel with them, even though they are coming from a culture that is far removed from the world of Ashkenazic Jewry.

The play's resounding international success is proof of its universality. Obviously, something about the plight of Germaine Lauzon and her sisters-in-law touches a chord. In translating into Yiddish a play as rooted in its time and place as this one, the question is, How much of a chord does it strike for a specifically Jewish audience? French Canadians are not Jews, and

Jews are not French Canadians. Translators, it seems to me, must never forget that they are dealing with two separate cultures and two different modes of expression. Losing sight of this crucial fact and fudging distinctions so that you end up with a piece of work that is neither fish nor fowl, neither here nor there, is one of the occupational hazards of translation. A successful translation, it seems to me, requires a healthy respect for and a thorough grasp of difference rather than of similarity.

Having said this, however, the next question becomes, How do these differences resolve themselves in the final product? because resolve themselves they must or there is no translation. The French Canadians are descended from the first European settlers of the northeastern part of North America, and their history is clouded by a national defeat. The Jews, however, came to Canada as willing immigrants in search of improved political, economic, and religious conditions. The meaning of poverty — to take just one example — is not the same for the two groups. For the French Canadians their poverty was an outward sign of national demoralization whereas for the Jews it was a necessary evil attendant on the fact of their being new arrivals in a new land. Poverty was not something that Jews — or for that matter most immigrants — expected for their children, however much they might be resigned to it for themselves.

That is one difference. Another is religion. *Les Belles-Soeurs* is set very specifically within the Catholic milieu of French-Canadian life in the mid-1960s. Unlike most European languages, Yiddish does not have a Christian context, and words for many common Christian prayers and practices simply do not exist in the language. As it turned out, however, the religious element in *Les Belles-Soeurs* gave very little trouble. Catholic terms like “the novena” could be easily rendered either as “nine prayers,” or as a Yiddishized version of the same word: *di novene*. On the other hand, the notion of confession does exist in Judaism, as does the term to describe it. Simple exclamations such as *doux Jésus* (sweet Jesus) or *ben crisse* (good Christ) were also amenable to literal translation. Even those words for which there were no Jewish equivalents, like “rosary,” turned out to be translatable.

However, the French-Canadian habit of using religious objects and expressions as swear words — *calice* (chalice), *sacré* (sacred), and *tabernacle* (tabernacle), for instance — simply cannot be translated literally and must be rendered by Yiddish expressions that carry the same punch rather than the same meaning: *farsholtn* (damned), *farshunken* (stinking), *kholera* (cholera), and so on. In such untranslatable words or phrases lies the distance between one culture and another.

A more serious problem than profanities was obscenities. Yiddish is not a particularly prim language. In fact, you might call it downright earthy. And I had plenty of scatological equivalents for all of those used by Tremblay. The problem here is cultural. The cultural context out of which Yiddish sprang is very careful about its use of high and low language, and serious theater is definitely not the place for obscenities. The prohibition against dirty language in Yiddish is much stronger than it is in either English or French.

So Tremblay's text had to be cleansed. Sometimes I could do this by raising the focus from the lower to the upper body. For instance, the wonderful phrase *ça pète plus haut que son trou* (she farts higher than her asshole), to indicate a person who has gotten above herself, became in Yiddish, “she spits higher than her mouth!” And the description of a little boy's mouth as *sa p'tite bouche en trou de cul de poule* (his little mouth in the shape of a chicken's anus) had to be fudged to a more generalized description of the boy's face as compared to the bottom part of a turkey, thereby losing the wonderful particularity of the French analogy.

Certain cultural differences are so subtle that they only become obvious when two languages are placed side by side. When a character in *Les Belles-Soeurs* complains of her companions that they make her feel as if she were living in a poultry yard, I changed the Yiddish to “pigpen.” In Yiddish, pigs, not chickens, carry the connotation of filth and disgust. In general, all derogatory references to chickens in the French text worked better when changed to some other animal in the Yiddish. The chicken is both too everyday and too benign in Yiddish.

Cultural artifacts that do not have equivalents in both languages presented another kind of problem. For instance, at one point the women in *Les Belle-Soeurs* play guessing games. One clue is “a social game,” and the answer in French is *la bouteille*. In English, the translation poses no problem since the game spin-the-bottle is well-known. But in Yiddish there is no such game, and consequently no such word. The answer I devised for the Yiddish text — adultery — which is a social game, after all, therefore suited the context of the scene, which is full of double entendres. However, it was not a faithful translation of the text.

A similar problem arises with puns, which are a translator's nightmare. In Tremblay's play, one of the sisters-in-law thinks up a slogan for a bookstore called Hachette: *Achète bien, qui achète chez Hachette*. (You buy well if you buy at Hachette.) There is simply no way to render this in Yiddish and still keep both word play and sense intact. The only solution I could think of was the rather clumsy one of having the character

explain while speaking Yiddish that in French *une hachette* means an axe, and then go on to give the slogan as "Hachette bookstore chops all prices." It's really not the same thing!

French and Yiddish do not on the surface appear to be languages that have a great deal in common. Because the majority of modern Jews tend to speak English and many Yiddish words have been absorbed into English, it is easier to imagine a link between English and Yiddish than between French and Yiddish. The fact is, however, that a fair number of Yiddish words, mostly nouns, derive from French. In fact, French is indigenous to Yiddish, whereas English is not. The roots of Yiddish were in both Germanic and Gallic lands. It is puzzling that the Gallic element gave way to the Germanic, leaving only traces of itself behind.

The Yiddish word for a date, *randke*, derives from the French *rendez-vous*, and a pimp in Yiddish is an *alphonse*, taken from the French name. "Sidewalk" is *trottoir* (French *trottoir*), "furniture" is *mebl* (French *meubles*), and so on. A popular name for men in Yiddish is *bunim*, which is a corruption of the French *bonhomme*. The existence of this French element in Yiddish proved to be a boon in translating *Les Belles-Soeurs*, since it helped me to imbue the Yiddish translation with a Gallic atmosphere while still remaining Yiddish.

Yiddish also provided an advantage in its use of diminutives. Both English and French are relatively impoverished in their use of the diminutive, which in these languages is generally formed by adding the word "little" or its synonyms to the noun. But Yiddish — like the Slavic languages — makes a diminutive by changing the form of the word itself. And several levels of diminishment are possible which may convey several nuances of meaning. For instance, *kats* in Yiddish is a cat. *Ketsl* is a smaller cat. *Ketsele* is even smaller—a kitten. *Ketseshi* is still a kitten, but used as a term of endearment for a person. *Ketseniu* and *ket-sukhna* are other possible variations.

In *Les Belles-Soeurs*, there is a section, called Quintet, in which five women complain about the drudgery of their lives by contrasting it to the sentimentalized beauties of nature, where the sun caresses little flowers while little birds open their tiny beaks to send their little cries up to heaven. This passage works particularly well in Yiddish where the adjective "little," which has its own diminutive, added to the diminutive of the noun emphasizes its ironic sentimentality.

Some things, in fact, work better in Yiddish than in French. For instance, Rose Ouimet, speaking about the senile Mme. Dubuc, says, in the French, "*Donnes-y donc un coke; ça va la boucher pour qu'elle t'empêche*" (Give her a coke; that will stop her mouth

for a while). In Yiddish the pun can be made more explicit, so Rose says, "*Gib ir a coke, vet di tsekorkevet farkorkevet vern.*" *Tsekorkevet* in Yiddish means someone who has a screw loose, and *farkorkevet* means to "stop with a cork." And this finally is the joy of translation — that every language contains its own linguistic quirks and idiosyncrasies, and discovering these quirks leaves one amazed at the rich diversity of human expression and the endless creativity of language.

I began by saying that translators are the most insecure of literary craftspeople, but they may with justice also be the proudest. If each language is like a country unto itself, then translators are the messengers between domains, privy to the secrets of both realms, eager and willing to impart the good news from abroad to all who would care to listen.

<sup>1</sup>The author adapted this paper for the conference from a longer article which she published as "Translating Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-Soeurs* from Joual into Yiddish," in *Ellipse: Oeuvres en traduction/Writers in translation*, vol. 52 (1994), pp. 107-16. Used with permission of the author.

<sup>2</sup>The vote was narrowly negative.

## Judith Friedlander

### YIDDISH LITERATURE IN FRENCH TRANSLATION: THE PIONEERING WORK OF RACHEL ETEL<sup>1</sup>

Americans interested in Yiddish culture and literature benefit a great deal by having the opportunity to meet and work with their counterparts in other countries. For New York Yiddishists, opportunities occur frequently, thanks to YIVO, the celebrated magnet for scholars the world over who are interested in studying East European Jewish culture.

Although I met Rachel Ertel in France, I could have just as easily run into her in New York, for she too makes regular trips to YIVO. Trained in American literature and culture, Rachel Ertel has written extensively on Jewish writers in the United States and eastern Europe. Teaching at the English Institute of the University of Paris VII, she was one of a small group of literature professors in the late 1960s who recognized the importance of looking at minority cultures in the United States. Her interest in Jewish-American literature led her back to one of the primary sources of that tradition, namely, East European Jewry, a tradition she knew well, for she herself was born in Poland and raised in a Yiddish-speaking home. Her parents are writers and deeply committed to Yiddish literature and culture.

Today, Rachel Ertel is known for her contributions in several overlapping fields. As a literary critic, she has made a name for herself as a specialist in twentieth-century Jewish-American literature and in



Yiddish poetry written during the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> She is also known as a cultural historian and praised for her analyses of East European Jews, most significantly for her book *Le shtetl*, which portrays *shtetl* life in Poland for the children and grandchildren of those described in *Life Is With People*, the classic work on the East European *shtetlekh*.<sup>3</sup> Ertel's *Le shtetl* analyzes the world of Polish Jewry in the interwar years, during the transition from the Orthodox Jewish tradition to secular modernity. Soon after publishing *Le shtetl*, she served as the major consultant for a three-part television series on Yiddish-speaking radicals from Poland and Russia. Called *Les révolutionnaires du Yiddishland*, the series aired on prime-time national television and was a huge critical success.<sup>4</sup>

Lastly, Rachel Ertel has pioneered a major translation project in France, making great works of Yiddish literature available to the French-reading public in excellent translations published by major French presses.<sup>5</sup> Over the last twenty years, she has translated upward of ten works from the Yiddish and edited and introduced the translations of nearly twenty others, many of which were translated by Rachel Ertel's students. Scholar, translator, and teacher, Rachel Ertel has not only published a great deal herself, she has created a new generation of Yiddishists who are devoted to the Yiddish language and its literature and to making this great cultural heritage accessible to the French-reading public.

Thanks to Rachel Ertel, the French have had the opportunity to learn something about the sophistication and complexity of East European secular Jewish culture. Challenging the popular image of isolated *shtetl* Jews, she has shown how Polish Jews in the interwar period participated in a wide range of literary and political movements. Through her works, we see people who were in the literary vanguard actively engaged in contributing to modernist culture.

In addition to translating and editing collections of the works of such major figures as Sholom Asch, Moishe Kulbak, H. Leivik, and Avrom Sutzkever, she also introduced a collection of translations from *Khaliastre* (The gang), an international Yiddish literary journal of the interwar years. Originally published in Paris and Warsaw in the 1920s and 1930s, this "futurist" publication included contributions by Sholom Asch, Marc Chagall, Jacob Glatstein, H. Leivik, Avrom Leyeles, Mani-Leib, Peretz Markish, Der Nister (pseudonym of Pinkhas Kaganovitch and to be understood as "the secret of Pinkhas Kaganovitch"), Joseph Opatoshu, Avrom Reizin, Lamed Shapiro, and I. J. Singer, among others — yes, all of them men.<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge, the only woman whose work Rachel Ertel has translated is that of her mother, Menuha Ram.

One of Rachel Ertel's earliest translations was of her mother's novel *Vintn* (Winds), under the title *Le vent qui passe*.<sup>7</sup> In this autobiographical tale, Menuha Ram describes the experiences of a Jewish woman and her infant daughter during World War II, of how she was deported from eastern Poland with her baby in 1930 by the Soviet army and sent to Kazakhstan. The infant was Rachel Ertel.

Menuha Ram came originally from Zetl (Zdzieciol), a small town in Byelorussia (now Belarus) that became part of Poland after World War I. Her father, a scribe (*soyfer*), earned a modest living making copies of holy books. When she was old enough to leave home, Menuha Ram went to Vilna to study. There she joined the Bund and married Rachel Ertel's father, who was also a member of the Jewish Social Democratic party. A carpenter by trade, he went on to become a union organizer for the Bund.

Rachel Ertel was born in Slonim in 1939, in what was then eastern Poland. When the Soviet troops invaded the city, a few months after her birth, Russian soldiers arrested and jailed her father for his political activities. Even though they did not keep him in prison for very long, by the time he got out, his wife and daughter had been exiled. Unable to find them, he remained in Slonim, joined the Resistance, and died there fighting the Germans.

After the war, Menuha Ram returned home with her daughter. Discovering that she had lost everyone, she went to Lodz, previously known for its large working-class Jewish population. In the devastated city, she found a job as a teacher of orphaned children and made arrangements for her daughter to attend the I. L. Peretz School. Several months after settling in Lodz, Menuha Ram met Moshe Waldman, a poet and activist on the Zionist left, and she remarried.

In 1948 the family moved to Paris and settled down in the newly reconstituted Yiddish community, which had been an important center before the war. Receiving a warm welcome, Moshe Waldman found work as a journalist and writer and continued his political activities. By this time Menuha Ram had given up her Bundist loyalties and become a Zionist too. Like many other survivors, she now firmly believed that Jews needed a nation that they could call their own. To devote one's life to creating a secular culture for Jews in the Diaspora may have lost its appeal for Menuha Ram, but she gave her daughter a love for a world that had been destroyed and the necessary tools to preserve the dream of the Jewish Bund.

As Socialist Zionists from eastern Europe, the Waldmans maintained their commitment to Yiddish culture and passed down the language to their children, speaking it at home, making it the source of the family's Jewish tradition. Grateful to them for having

raised her in Yiddish, Rachel Ertel later dedicated *Le Shtetl* to "my parents [the Waldmans] who gave me the key to this universe."

Shortly after she arrived in France, the young Rachel lost her ability to speak Russian and Polish, replacing those languages with French and English, which she was learning in school. After passing her baccalaureate exam in 1957, she decided to spend a year in New York City, studying at Columbia University.

On the streets of Manhattan, Rachel Ertel marveled at the ethnic diversity. Her experiences in New York convinced her that it was still possible to find a society like the one her parents had known, where people who identified with different cultures and spoke different languages could live side by side. As we have already seen, Rachel Ertel went on to specialize in the work of writers representing minority cultures in the United States and eventually prepared a doctoral dissertation on American Jewish literature.

When the students staged their revolt in 1968, Rachel Ertel was teaching at the Sorbonne and was well placed to respond to the call for change and to initiate new programs in the French university system. Teaming up with those interested in working on minority cultures, she accepted a position in 1969 at the Institut d'Anglais of the University of Paris VII.

From the beginning, Paris VII attracted academics interested in feminist and ethnic studies. Those working on aspects of American culture offered courses on the history and literature of women, African Americans, Native Americans, and Jews. By 1970, Rachel Ertel had established the Centre d'Etudes Judéo-Américaines at the Institut d'Anglais, and this rapidly evolved into a successful program of Yiddish culture, with four levels of language courses as well as seminars on a wide range of topics. Today, in addition to Rachel Ertel, there are other instructors of Yiddish, some of whom had studied with her in the early days of the program.

According to Rachel Ertel, in the years immediately following 1968, her students in Yiddish were activists identified with the left who were looking for ways to make a connection between their political convictions and personal histories. Rachel Ertel's agenda was slightly different: She conducted these courses with the hope of laying the foundations for developing cultural diversity in a country like France, which had traditionally promoted the ideal of cultural uniformity, of one nation (or culture) within the state. And Rachel Ertel was not working alone. She was one of the founding members of a group known as Le Cercle Gaston Crémieux, which wanted to promote minority cultures in France.

Founded in 1967, and committed to the promotion of secular Jewish culture, Le Cercle Gaston Crémieux was determined to replace the historical French model of "one nation within one state" and

made alliances with the Bretons, Occitans, and other ethnic groups in the country. Eventually, the Cercle hoped, the group would influence government policy.

The leader of the Cercle was Richard Marienstras. Shakespearean scholar and professor of English at the same Institut d'Anglais, Marienstras was the first to analyze closely the contradictions imposed on assimilated Jews in France. With a group of one hundred and fifty professors and students, Marienstras studied Jewish history from the perspective of Simon Dubnow, the great Russian apologist for Diaspora Jewry, and looked for ways to develop a secular Jewish culture in France. Influenced as well by the Bundists, Marienstras envisioned a national Jewish tradition tied neither to the synagogue nor to the state of Israel. Committed to the development of Jewish cultures in the Diaspora, Le Cercle Gaston Crémieux encouraged Jews to seek ethnic autonomy in a joint political effort with other minorities. And they succeeded, finally, in shaping the platform of the Socialist party on the question of the rights of minorities.

"To attack the language and culture of a people is to inflict the deepest of wounds. We proclaim the right to be different." François Mitterand made this declaration during his campaign for the presidency in 1981. While the Socialist government did not live up to Mitterand's promise, its minister of culture, Jack Lang, invited people to submit project proposals to help develop a national program for assisting the country's diverse ethnic groups to develop their autonomous cultures. In February 1982, Lang received a lengthy position paper from a researcher affiliated with the National Center of Scientific Research (CNRS), Henri Giordan, who was also a regular participant in the activities sponsored by Le Cercle Gaston Crémieux.

Written in consultation with Richard Marienstras, Rachel Ertel, and other members of the group, the report asked, implicitly, that the French government assume the role the Cercle had been playing for years in trying to unite the efforts of ethnic minorities living in France. Now it was time, Henri Giordan argued, for the minister of culture to take over the responsibility.

Combining the ideas of the Bundists and Austro-Hungarian Marxists with the material realities of present-day France, the concerns of Giordan's program went beyond the cultural development of peoples who had stayed together in restricted areas of the country. Giordan maintained that with the exception, perhaps, of Corsica, regional nationalism would not solve the problems facing minorities living in France for at least three reasons: (1) Regions were no longer homogeneous; (2) minority peoples did not necessarily live in the regions of origin; (3) there were nonterritorial minorities living in France who should also enjoy the right to develop their cultures.

According to Giordan, a series of external and internal pressures had challenged the historical ideal of building a democracy through the diffusion of one dominant, "legitimate" culture. Worldwide economic factors had forced the national market to yield to an international one, permitting a continuous flow of foreign goods that replaced many aspects of traditional French culture. What is more, in recent years, France has had to face the challenge of minorities that refuse to accept the eighteenth-century principle of one nation within one state and have demanded the right to develop their own traditions instead.

How should the French government respond? By recognizing formally the cultural autonomy of its minorities: "Every community of citizens, wherever it may be, must have the right to organize an autonomous cultural life." Giordan presented a plan for the promotion of minority histories, languages, and cultures, including the organization of research projects of an ethnographic and linguistic nature and the formation of programs to sponsor minority literatures, theaters, music, and the visual arts. Besides offering suggestions about how to teach minority languages, Giordan recommended that the French government subsidize the cultural autonomy of its recognized minorities in ways similar to the platform drawn up by social democrats, such as the Bund, earlier this century.

Endorsing the proposal, Jack Lang created a National Council of Regional Languages and Cultures in 1986 with the hope of coordinating the efforts of all minority peoples living in France. He had in mind members of such regional language groups as the Basque, Breton, Catalan, and Corsican; the speakers of Franco-German dialects (Alsatian, Flemish, Francique) and of Oc, as well as those who used the Oïl dialects (Gallo and Picard). Under the influence of Henri Giordan and Le Cercle Gaston Crémieux, he also included members of the following nonterritorial language groups: Arabic, Armenian, Berber, Creole, Hebrew, Judeo-Spanish (Ladino), Portuguese, Romany, Soninkî, Spanish, Turkish, Vietnamese, and Yiddish.

The Jewish minority had two representatives on the council, both of them women: Rachel Ertel for the Ashkenazim and Lucette Valensi for the Sephardim. Lucette Valensi is a Tunisian-born social historian who has written extensively on Jews in North Africa and the Middle East. Although the council never had much influence and was eventually dissolved, it did validate the ongoing efforts of people, like Rachel Ertel, to continue developing her program to teach Yiddish and to translate Yiddish literature into French.

Despite her deep commitment to Yiddish, Rachel Ertel was never interested in trying to revive East European Jewish culture in France. Instead, she hopes to preserve its memory, acknowledge its great literary

moments, and apply some of the political insights associated with the tradition in contemporary France. Yiddish, she explains, belongs to an annihilated people who should never be forgotten but whose past should not be trivialized by folkloric imitations.

In keeping with the ideals of Le Cercle Gaston Crémieux, Rachel Ertel has defined her role as an interpreter and teacher. She trains students to make the world of secular Yiddishists accessible to the French reading public. Rejecting all attempts to reconstruct what no longer exists, she uses translation as a way of transposing one culture onto another, of transforming and adapting as she goes along, creating a new secular Jewish tradition in France. While she feels that she still has much to accomplish, Rachel Ertel hopes her work has contributed to the collective effort of minority groups in France to break down the hegemony of one dominant national culture and make room for the recognition of diversity. Not only has she made a contribution, she has been singularly influential and successful.

<sup>1</sup>Much of the material presented in this paper comes from my book, *Vilna on the Seine: Jewish Intellectuals in Paris Since 1968*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., 1990.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. *Le Roman juif américain, écriture minoritaire*, Payot, Paris, 1980; *Dans la langue de personne; poésie yiddish de l'anéantissement*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1993.

<sup>3</sup>*Le shtetl; la bourgade juive de Pologne de la tradition à la modernité*, Payot, Paris, 1982; Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is with People*, Schocken, New York, 1952.

<sup>4</sup>*Les révolutionnaires du yiddishland*. Film by Nat Lilienstein, with historical collaboration of Rachel Ertel, Antenne 2, 1984.

<sup>5</sup>Translations include (in chronological order): Mendel Mann, *Au bord de la Vistule*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1960, and "La ballade du Rocher de Petra," in *La table ronde*, Paris, 1960; Elie Chekhtman, *A la veille de . . .*, EFR, Paris, 1964; H. Leivick, "Poèmes et extraits d'oeuvres dramatiques," in Leivick, *Poète yiddish*, under the direction of M. Waldman, Gopa, Paris, 1965; I. Spiegel, *Les flammes de la terre*, Gallimard, Paris, 1973; and *Une échelle vers le ciel*, Gallimard, Paris, 1980; Avrom Sutzkever, *Où gisent les étoiles*, preface and some of the translations by Rachel Ertel, Albin Michel, Paris, 1988; *Shalom Asch*, Moscou, Belfond, Paris, 1989; I. Rabon, *La rue*, Juillard, Paris, 1992.

Ertel has also translated the works of ten poets of the Shoah in *Dans la langue de personne*, op.cit., *Les Temps Modernes*, and *Poésie*, December 1994. She has also edited various series of Yiddish translations at several major publishing houses, including *L'Age d'homme*, Le Seuil, Juillard, and Liana Lévi, directing the French translations of nearly twenty volumes of poetry and prose.

<sup>6</sup>*Khaliastre-la bande: Revue futuriste yiddish*, Varsovie, Paris, edited and with a preface by Rachel Ertel, Michel Albin, Paris, 1989).

<sup>7</sup>Menuha Ram, *Le vent qui passe*, Juillard, Paris, 1974.



## Workshops

Ellen Rifkin

### THE NON-YIDDISH SPEAKER AND *DI GOLDENE KEIT*: HOW DO I FORGE A LINK IN THE GOLDEN CHAIN?

In addition to the listings in the bibliography and resources list in the appendix, Ellen Rifkin makes the following recommendations.

#### Textbooks

Zuckerman, Marvin, and Marion Herbst. *Learning Yiddish In Easy Stages*. Joseph Simon/Pangloss Press, 1987. For answer book and accompanying tape, write to Marion Herbst, 1311 N. Kenter Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90049.

Jofen, Jean B. *Yiddish for Beginners* (1994). Write to Jofen at 1684 52nd Street, Brooklyn, NY 11204.

#### Dictionaries

Harkavy, Alexander. *Yiddish-English-Hebrew Dictionary*. Random House, 1988.

#### Songtapes with transliterations and translations

Schaechter-Gottesman, Beyle. *Zumerteg: Tsvantsik zinglider!* Twenty Yiddish songs. Congress for Jewish Culture (see under Bibliography and Resources in *Proceedings* appendix).

Sheh-Sheh. *Songs of My Grandfather*. Includes Yiddish, transliteration, and English. Mameloshn Music, 61 Sylvia Drive, West Islip, NY 11795; 516-587-4172.

Cohen, Frumi, and Susan Cohen. *Undzer yidish: Yiddish Songs for Young People*. Text includes transliteration and translations but not original Yiddish. Available through Workmen's Circle or Mameloshn Records, 2627 Sunset Boulevard, Broomall, PA 19008.

#### Volumes for children and youth that adults will love, too.

(available through the National Yiddish Book Center)

Levinsohn, Marcia Gruss. *Di dray bern: Mirele-Goldherele antshuldikt zikh*. Bilingual text with English transliteration. Available through the National Yiddish Book Center, the Workmen's Circle, and the Jewish Educational Workshop, 2209 Greenery Lane, Silver Spring, MD 20906; 301-933-3520.

Maze, Ida. *Vaksen mayne kinderlekh: muter un kinderlider*. Canadian Yiddish Congress, 1954.

Molodowsky, Kadia. *Yidishe kinder: mayselekh*. Central Committee of the Jewish Folk Schools of the Jewish National Workers Alliance and Poale Zion, 1945.

See also Avrom Reisin, *Di lider* (1951) for poetry written in rhymed verse that's quite accessible for intermediate learners and *Antologye fun der yidisher literatur far yugnt* (1974), an anthology of classic Yiddish writers for youth. Congress for Jewish Culture.

Amy Beth

### *DI LEZBIANKES UN DOS FOLK*: IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE ROLE OF LESBIANS IN THE RENEWAL OF SECULAR YIDDISH CULTURE

Workshop participants, mostly lesbians, spanned four generations from seven countries. They recounted different roles of Yiddish in their lives: native language, element of their childhood memory, center of Jewish activism and political identification, medium of artistic expression, and an integral part of their cultural inheritance.

I gave my own history. Like other secular Jews, I was a young adult when I developed an interest in my background. This was triggered by *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* and became an abiding concern for Yiddish language, Jewish history, culture, and politics—all in a feminist context. I was aware of the need to resist and reverse the tide of assimilation. Contemporary lesbians in the United States have ample opportunities to meld into lesbian feminist cultural work and to separate further from Jewish cultures and communities. However, I found that within the progressive Yiddish community, lesbians are an active force in maintaining and expanding Jewish traditions, one that has been quite evident.

My workshop was based on the belief that a new generation must insist on the inclusion of lesbians and gays in future Yiddish language and cultural work. Participants discussed our role in the renewal movement, focusing on the impact of space, place and environment on lesbians and gay men in the context of Yiddish work.

I asked how the resurgence of Yiddish culture among its lesbian and gay revivalists would or could take place and thrive without physical institutional structures or without institutional support. Where are these spaces and places? If our sense of space is created anew at each Yiddish gathering, what is the impact of temporary space on those who participate—straight and gay? There are some gatherings, such as Klezkamp, where lesbians consistently attend in high numbers. Does a reliable annual gathering such as this still only count as temporal space?

I conveyed to the group some feelings of lesbians active in Yiddish revival movements. Irena Klepfisz, for example, in a letter to me wrote:

Everybody's noticed, but no one's really studied lesbian/gay involvement in Yiddish culture. Most are reluctant to bring it up . . . but it's critical that lesbians who feel they 'don't know anything' (and my experience is that people who say that usually know more than those who walk around pretending they're experts) must get involved if Yiddish is to survive.

The base of 'those who know' is tiny, unfeminist, sometimes flagrantly and sometimes subtly homophobic. A new generation around Yiddish has to emerge which incorporates contemporary political consciousness—with all its complications."<sup>1</sup>

Ellen Rifkin, in an article in the feminist journal *Bridges*, describes watching *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, Gregg Bordowitz's autobiographical film about living with AIDS and being Jewish. The film includes the voice of Lorin Sklamberg—a musician/singer with the Klezmatics—belting out "*In kamf*" (In struggle). The lyrics, written in 1889, were sung at workers' rallies and in protest of the 1903 Kishinev pogroms. Rifkin writes:

When I heard the perfect fit of the Yiddish words, written over a century ago, to a contemporary struggle that I identify with as a lesbian and a Jew, the effect was electrifying and cathartic. A huge and healing relief swept through me, a simultaneous mourning and joy . . . I was attending Klezkamp, an annual gathering to celebrate Yiddish language and culture . . . the very old and very young . . . different generations, different life experiences, a place where we would argue and listen intensely to each other . . .<sup>2</sup>

Rifkin concludes: "A barrier gives way and something bursts through, breathes. I think the joy comes from the power in community: The dead are in reach; I can hear them. For a moment, I've lost nothing."

Alicia Svigals, another member of the Klezmatics, echoes Rifkin's feelings: "I think lesbians and gays should combine our contemporary crises with what our fore-generations have lived through. It makes a space for our commonness that no one could predict and, certainly, no one would have encouraged. Our work and not our apology is important."<sup>3</sup>

Rachel Lurie, a Jewish lesbian and appreciator and promoter of secular Yiddish culture, told me:

When we as Queers talk about the "future of our communities," we are not always talking about making babies. Often our future is reflected in our commitment to insure the documentation, preservation, and education of our past. This reality, and personal and group identity, can be said of many drawn to or active in the Yiddish revival movement.<sup>4</sup>

Eve Sicular, a klezmer percussionist who has taught Yiddish and worked at YIVO, now lectures on "The Celluloid Closet of Yiddish Film: A Beginning Critique of Yiddish Film from a Gay and Lesbian Perspective" at gay and lesbian film festivals. She gives us still another way to view the past and present.<sup>5</sup> Through clips from Yiddish classics, Sicular points to numerous cases of "mistaken identity," women passing as men, and homoerotic male subtexts. Sicular also documents how Yiddish film led to Yinglish's popularity with the non-Yiddish and Yiddish speaker alike; she affirms the place in *yidishkayt* today of gay and lesbian

Jewish artists who are non-Yiddish speaking.

The resurgence of *yidishkayt* among secular Jewish lesbians and gay men raises general questions about revival and survival, but also specific ones about Jewish lesbians and gays:

- How do we identify? (I presented a photo from the Lesbian Herstory Archives, showing participants in a NYC Gay Pride March carrying a banner reading "Gay Yiddishists.")
- What do we as lesbians know about the importance of community in reviving or reclaiming language and culture?
- Does it affect us to be a community that is not space placed? (We are not a sub-community, we are an emerging backbone.)
- How can we avoid being understood as a subculture?
- How do existing spaces and places welcome their lesbian and gay participants when lifestyle and personal/sexual identity is not concealed?
- What attracts non-Yiddish speaking gays and lesbians to Yiddish culture?
- How does "community development" take place across dispersed geographic areas? Could it be our presence is felt in the Yiddish movement because we've already learned how to organize as a homo-movement?
- There has been an otherwise generational decline of gesture, yet we are trying not to assimilate. How can we relate to this from our lesbian and gay histories? As Jewish lesbians with multiple identities, do we need or prefer to spend time with lesbian social groups and does our support of lesbian institutions compete/conflict with our love of Yiddish family and community?
- What influence does secularism play in the participation of lesbians and gay men in Yiddish culture?

The session included a discussion on the differences between a "living tradition" and one that calls for revival. It was in part informed by an article by Irena Klepfisz in *Bridges*, "*Di mames, dos loshn*/The mothers, the language: Feminism, *Yidishkayt*, and the Politics of Memory"; by the work of the Lesbian Herstory Archives; and by references to the ethnic revival movement of the Irish Arts Center in New York City during the 1970s. We articulated the strong need for lesbians to ensure the documentation of our participation and contributions to Yiddish culture and language as an act of insistence of inclusion and memory in the historical legacy and record.

A handout from Yugntruf on *freylekh*/homosexual terminology was distributed.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Irena Klepfisz, personal correspondence with Amy Beth, 1994.

<sup>2</sup>Ellen (Elke) Rifkin, "*Fun di oysyes koyekh shepn*/Drawing strength from the letters: Language and land in the Diaspora," *Bridges*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Winter 1996/5756), pp. 20–30.

<sup>3</sup>Alicia Svigals, personal correspondence with Amy Beth, 1995.

<sup>4</sup>Rachel Lurie, personal correspondence with Amy Beth, 1995.

<sup>5</sup>See below in these Proceedings for the summary of

Sicular's presentation at the conference. See also Sicular, "A yingl mit a yingl hot epes a tam: The Celluloid Closet of Yiddish Film," *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review*, Special Issue, vol. 16, no. 1 (1994), pp. 40-45. Also by Sicular: "Gender Rebellion in Yiddish Film: It's More than Victor/Victoria—Molly Picon, Gender Rebellion and Jewish Anxiety," *Lilith*, Winter 1995-96, pp. 12-17.

<sup>6</sup>"Homoseksualistishe/heteroseksualistishe terminologie/Homosexual and heterosexual terminology," *Yugntruf*, Dec. 1994, pp. 13-15. Back issues are \$4 from Yugntruf.

## Naomi Kadar

### ORGANIZING A FOLKSHULE

A *folkshule* is an organization established by parents and community to impart an understanding of Jewish heritage and love of a Jewish secular way of life. The *folkshule* teaches cultural rather than religious practices, traditions rather than rules and scriptures. It seeks to impart the historical lineage of Jewish/Yiddish language and traditions and the idea of Yiddish as *folksprakh*. The *folkshules* were established in America in the early twentieth century because of concerns about assimilation. They also eased the way for immigrants in feeling part of the American-Jewish experience.

In the early years, everything was taught in Yiddish, and literature, grammar, song, etc., were all included in the curriculum. Some of the factors that caused *folkshules* to shift from focusing primarily on language to becoming more culturally centered included the migration of Jews to the suburbs, the rise in the prominence of Hebrew as a spoken vernacular after the establishment of the state of Israel, and the devastating impact of the Holocaust on the number of native Yiddish speakers. As time went on, Yiddish wasn't reinforced strongly at home and played only a small part in other subjects in the *folkshule* curriculum, such as Jewish history, literature, ethics, music, art, and holiday celebrations.

Strategies for increasing the role of Yiddish in *folkshules* include forming a basis for love of learning in and about Yiddish; creating Yiddish music and language tapes to listen to as homework or for pleasure; and organizing immersion programs for those who appear highly committed to Yiddish. The following sample illustrates the process:<sup>1</sup>

### Kinderblumen Session VIII: Thanksgiving, Autumn, Gratitude, and Hospitality

**1. Greetings:** Usually when we meet, we talk about Jewish holidays. This week we have an American holiday: Thanksgiving. What are some of the things for which we are thankful? (List children's responses on oaktag.) Each of us has something for which to be thankful as individuals. As Jews living in America, we

are thankful for having a country where we can live freely. We can celebrate our own Jewish holidays, and we can learn about our own culture.

**2. In Yiddish,** "Thanksgiving" is *danktog*: a *dank* means "thank you" and *tog* means "day." The holiday *danktog* happens in *harbst*. Listen to the word *harbst*. Doesn't it sound like the English word "harvest?" *Harbst* means "autumn"; it is the time of the harvest. Do you remember another harvest holiday about which we have spoken? Yes, *sukos*. Thanksgiving is like *sukos*.

### 3. Autumn themes

**a. Autumn colors:** *broyn*, "brown"; *royt*, "red"; *gel*, "yellow"; *oranzh*, "orange"

**b. Thanksgiving foods:** Teach the following vocabulary using pictures or actual items of food: *der indik*, "turkey"; *di malines*, "cranberries"; *der kartofl*, "potato"; *di batate*, "sweet potato"; *di kukuritze*, "corn"; *dos broyt*, "bread"; *der epl*, "apple"; *der epl-tsimes*, "applesauce"; *der epl-zaft*, "apple juice"; *di dinie*, "pumpkin"; *der pay*, "pie"

**4. Poem:** *A greyter tish* (A set table), by Beryl Segal<sup>2</sup>

אָ גרייטער טיש  
בערל סעגאל

קומט צום טיש,  
ער שטייט געגרייט,  
און זאל אייך וויל באַקומען.  
ווער עס הונגערט,  
ווער עס דאַרשט,  
דער זאל תיכף קומען.

מילך און האַניק,  
ברייט מיט זאַלץ,  
און אפשר ווילט איר חלה?  
עסט געזונט,  
און טרינקט געזונט,  
ס'איז דאָ גענוג פֿאַר אַלע.

Come to the table,/It is set and ready,/Come and enjoy our plenty./Whoever is hungry,/Whoever is thirsty,/Should come right away.

Milk and honey,/Bread with salt,/And perhaps you'd like some khale?/Eat and drink as much as you'd like,/There is plenty for everyone.)

**5. Arts and crafts:** Make leaf rubbings by placing a leaf between two pieces of white paper and rubbing the paper with the side of a peeled crayon; the veins of the leaf show the rough texture in color. Create a collage using pictures, cut from magazines, of foods associated with the Thanksgiving feast.

**6. Serve a seasonal snack:** popcorn and apple juice.

7. Read the Thanksgiving story *The Treasure*, by Uri Shulevitz (Farrar Giroux Strauss, 1987).

<sup>1</sup>The lesson was written by Naomi Kadar and Annette Harchik; to obtain additional lessons from the authors, contact Naomi Kadar at Workmen's Circle (see "Bibliography and Resources, below").

<sup>2</sup>Reprinted with the kind permission of the The Workmen's Circle. All rights reserved.

Sarah Blacher Cohen

### LIVING AND WRITING THE JEWISH-AMERICAN COMEDY

I, an English professor at the University at Albany, writing many serious and respectful studies of humor in Jewish-American literature, did an about-face and created my own irreverent comedy of character, ideas, situation, and language. I gave myself permission to discontinue being a sheltered critic, set in her ways, to become a vulnerable playwright, ready to revise and to please many constituencies. In other words, I became that Jewish tailor willing to make the pants longer or shorter to please the customers.

The most powerful catalyst activating my creative energies was my collaboration on the play *Schlemiel the First* with Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer. I shaped the structure of the play, fleshed out the characters, heightened the comedy of the scenes, wrote new dialogue, and pruned out anecdotal materials. In 1984 the play had a six-week run at New York's Jewish Repertory Theater.

In 1985 and 1986, ideas for my own play began percolating in my head during my daily physical therapy swims at the Albany Jewish Center. They came to a boil as I sat in the women's locker room, that compressed chamber of life, and listened to scarred women speak openly about breast surgery; young, nubile ones mutter narcissistic fears of growing old; and the elderly mourn the loss of family, friends, and vigor. Were we to meet each other outside in street clothes, we might never have talked beyond a cursory "hello." Yet, no matter what one's public persona might reveal, people become vocal about their vulnerabilities when they shed the protection of their clothes. In those moments, some truth-telling takes place. With their idiosyncratic personalities and unique physical impairments, they became for me the stuff of drama, quirky characters in search of an author.

What happens to these women in the ladies locker room? In what ways do these bared souls bare their souls? The play comically explores the connection among elderly, disabled and young able-bodied women of different nationalities and religions. Through diverse, accented dialogue and varied levels of discourse, the play illustrates the intricate workings

of the locker room as a miniature United Nations, with its power plays, strained attempts at negotiation, inevitable compromises and capitulations. Through depicting their responses to minor catastrophes and major miracles, the play reveals how these women come to accept their flawed beings.

From a Jewish point of view, the locker room companions are, in the words of one reviewer, "a microcosm of Diaspora Jewry—East European, Central European, and American. Susan's handicap places her in a doubly 'marginal' status. Jewish and disabled, she finds kinship as one who 'walks funny' with Sophie, who 'talks funny,' but who 'didn't have an accent' until she moved to America."<sup>1</sup>

Though *The Ladies Locker Room* reveals the torment of youthful disability and old age, it is still a fun-house where the elderly create Jewish mirth to distract the disabled from their pain. Though the characters talk about the tragic parts of life, Sophie, in particular, engages her wit in the humor of verbal retrieval. Through her comic reformulations of the tearful, she succeeds in salvaging the antic from the anguished. Cynthia Ozick also commented on the play's humor of verbal retrieval. She wrote me: "You really dare to look the Medusa directly in the eye. You hide nothing. No cosmetics, no lies, instead the full range of mortal contingency and limitation. And all of it laced with quips and high jinks. Your *Ladies Locker Room* is a tragic place, a little hell. But your characters raise hell in that hell and make light of all our human bondage."<sup>2</sup>

The locker room is also a makeshift labor room where Sophie, the embodiment of the vibrant Yiddish past, motivates the disabled Jewish-American professor to help an able-bodied Gentile woman give birth to her first child. Thus the locker room, with its overflow of affection and life-enhancing Jewish comedy, contributes to the symbolic rebirth and empowerment of the disabled.

Indeed, for Sally Chasnoff, the director of the Northwestern University production of the play, the "central issue of *The Ladies Locker Room* is disability, or rather the tension between 'dis-abled' and 'differently abled,' and how these perspectives not simply influence but actually determine lives. The play compels us to look at 'disability' as a metaphor for the countless difficulties and limitations of living in the physical body for all of us, as well as a term for special bodily conditions."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Robert A. Cohn, "Humor Triumphs Over Despair in *Ladies Locker Room*," *St. Louis Jewish Light*, May 30, 1990, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Letter to Sarah Blacher Cohen, Dec. 5, 1988.

<sup>3</sup>Chasnoff, Sally, Program Notes for Northwestern University Production, *The Ladies Locker Room*, April 10-14, 1991.

## Readings/Commentary/Performance

Troim Katz Handler

## A BILINGUAL READING OF HER POETRY

The following two poems are from my book-in-progress, "Simkhe," about a love affair conducted mainly over the telephone; it is an epistolary Yiddish novel in poetry about Simkhe and Tema. Thirty-six years ago they had a one-afternoon "affair" and have not seen each other since. They learn of each other's whereabouts by chance and really fall in love for the first time. She is happily married, lives and works in the East; he is happily married, lives and works in the Southwest. They fantasize that they are together and write Yiddish poems and letters. Many of the poems are sexual or at least erotic; those presented here are love poems. The lovers leave their poems and letters on their answering machines, to be savored again and again.

I consider the writing of sensuous/sexual poems to be a long-neglected feminist act, especially in Yiddish, where the literature has been male dominated and puritanical. However, I readily admit that making love over the telephone and through literature is the coward's way out, a kind of "safe sex." Women have written sensuous but not sexual poems in Yiddish. Among the men, Isaac Bashevis Singer did write erotica, but he was a pioneer.

I had not written creatively until April 26, 1991, when I wrote my first poem the night after the funeral of my father, Menke Katz, who was a Yiddish-English poet. He wrote erotic Yiddish poetry in 1932, for which he was thrown out of the Prolet-Pen, the Yiddish writers' guild, and not readmitted for five years. He changed his themes but did leave an erotic Yiddish poem in his will.

Interestingly enough, my brother, Dovid Katz, of Oxford University, had never written creatively, either, although he had published academic books. He, too, started writing creatively after our father died and has since published three short-story collections in Yiddish. "Simkhe" now contains 155 poems.

## U-VA, HU-HU

(Poem 118 in "Simkhe")

*For you, Simkhe darling, beloved nightingale*

פֿאַר דיר, שײַמחזשײ, מײַן באַליבטסטער סאַלאָווי  
— „אָוואָ, הוּ-הו“

אַ האַלבע נאַכט הער איך  
ווי דו יאַמערסט, טרויערטייב.  
דו וואָרקעסט און דו קלאַגסט  
בײַ מײַן פֿאַרמאַכטער שויב  
דו וועקסט מיך פֿון מײַן שלאָף.  
צעשרויפֿסט מיך ווען איך וואָך.

דו וויינסט און שמייסט  
שטעכסט און שרייסט.  
צערווערסט מיר דעם גייסט.

אפֿשר האָט אַ רויבֿפֿויגל  
גענוגֿעט דינע אייער?  
צי האָט אַ ווילדער ווינט  
צעריסן דיר דעם שלייער?  
האַבן די האַלצהעקער  
צעשמעטערט דיר דאָס הויז?  
צי האָט אַ וועווערקע  
גענומען דיין זונרויז?  
אפֿשר האָט אַ שפּאַטֿפֿויגל  
צעכאַפֿט די קערנער  
צווישן די דערנער?  
האַט אַ וואַלדקאַץ  
געסטראָשעט דיר דיין שאַץ?

צי ווינט דיין טערקלטייב  
אין אַ ווייטן וואַלד  
און פֿליט נאָך ווייטער איצט  
און וועט ניט קומען באַלד?  
מײַן וואַנדערטייב  
איז תמיד ווייט פֿון מיר  
און גראַד אָט די וואָך  
איז ער ווייטער נאָך.

נאַכט-שרייער,  
כאַטש דו ביסט מיר טייער,  
פֿאַרטויב איך די אויערן  
ווען איך הער דיין „אָוואָ, הוּ-הו“.

Half the night I hear your lament,/Mourning  
dove;/you coo and cry/at my closed pane./You  
rouse me from my sleep, /unhinge me when I  
wake, you moan and whip,/pierce and  
scream,/shatter my spirit.

Perhaps a robber-bird/has stolen your eggs?/Or  
has a wild wind/torn apart your shelter?/Have  
the wood choppers/hacked your home?/Or has a  
squirrel/Taken your sunflower?/Perhaps a mock-  
ing bird/has filched the seeds/among the  
thorns?/Has a wildcat threatened/your serenity?

Or does your turtledove live/in a distant  
forest/and flies yet further off/and will not soon  
return?/My wanderdove/is always far from  
me/and this very week/is farther still.

Night-caller,/although you are dear to me,/I  
deafen my ears/when I hear your "U-va, hu-hu/  
U-va, hu-hu.

## WATER IMAGE

(Poem 148 in "Simkhe")

*For you, Simkhe, my joy and jubilation*

פֿאַר דיר, שײַמחֶה, מיין שוין־ווייַזמחֶה -  
וואָסערבילד

איך זיך ביים טייך.  
דעם זעלבן טייך  
וואו כהאָב געשריבן  
פֿאַר אַ יאָרן.  
דו קומסט צו מיר.  
דו שווימסט צו מיר.  
ווי פֿריער אין זכרון.

געדאַנקען צאַנקען.  
רונצלען בלאַנקען.  
דאָס וואָסער פֿלייצט  
דאָ שטיל.  
דו ביסט מיט מיר  
ביים וואָסער קיל.  
איך זאָג דיר וואָס איך פֿיל.

אַ זשאַבע שפּרינגט.  
אַ פֿויגל זינגט.  
איך הער אַ מאַטאָרס ברום.  
איך קוק זיך אום.  
דו ביסט נישטאָ -  
איך נעם דיר שטיל אַרום.

I sit at the river,/the very same river/where I  
wrote one year ago./You come to me,/you swim  
to me,/as in my memory.

Thoughts flicker,/tripples sparkle,/the water  
here/flows still./You are with me/by the cool  
water,/I tell you how I feel.

A frog jumps,/a bird sings,/I hear a motor's roar./I  
look about,/you are gone—/I hold you close to me.

Lea (Elinor) Robinson

A BILINGUAL READING OF HER POETRY<sup>1</sup>

Since the late 1970s I have been writing short stories and poems in Yiddish. I am now working on a novel about time travel. Although my subject matter and plots are often allegorical or fantastic, I aim at verisimilitude in my dialogs and descriptions. I think of all my writing as somehow fitting together, like the forests, villages, and islands on an imaginary map.

Some of my sources of inspiration: Jewish folklore, archeology, childhood and adolescent memories (especially of the landscape around Oxford, England), current observations of life and nature in New York, love, dreams, conversations with friends.

Some of my favorite Yiddish writers: Rabbi Nachman, Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, Perets, H. Leivick, Moyshe Kulbak, I. B. Singer, Esther Kreitman, A. N. Stencl, Malka Heifetz-Tussman, Gabriel Prell (also in Hebrew), Lazar Ran. Other favorite writers: Dafydd ap Gwilym, Omar Khayyam, Shakespeare, Emily Bronte, Edgar Allan Poe, Lewis Carroll, Hans Andersen, Emily Dickinson, Aron Meir Goldschmidt (a Danish-Jewish writer), H. P. Lovecraft, Kafka, Langston Hughes. Nonfiction writers: Plato, Robert Burton (author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*), Darwin.

I greatly admire the work of many contemporary Yiddish writers. Because of their enthusiasm, dedication, and inventiveness, I am optimistic about the future of Yiddish literature. However, far more needs to be done to publish and distribute current Yiddish writing, and to educate, support, and encourage beginning and veteran Yiddish writers.

## OLD WINE

אַלטער וויין

אין טיפן קעלער שטייט אַ פֿאַס.  
אין פֿאַס געפֿינט זיך אַלטער וויין  
וואָס איז עלטער ווי דו מיינסט.  
אין יעדן רויטן טראָפּן וויין  
עפֿנט זיך אַ ברייטער תּהום.  
אין יעדן תּהום ווערן געבוירן  
אוניווערסן אַלע רגע.  
אין יעדן יונגן אוניווערס  
דרייען זיך גאַלאַקסיעס שטערן.  
אַרום יעדן הייסן שטערן  
שוועבן קליינע שטויבעלעך.  
אויף יעדן שטויבל וואָקסט אַ וועלט  
מיט ריחות, קלאַנגען און קאַלירן.  
מאָכן. יאַטשערקעס און מענטשן.  
אויף יעדער וועלט עס וווינט אַ מענטש  
וואָס פֿאַרגעמט זיך נאָר מיט כּישוף.  
אַט דער מענטש פֿאַרמאָגט אַ הויז.  
אונטערן הויז עס פֿירן טרעפּ  
טיף אַראָפּ צו אַ קעלער.  
אינעם קעלער שטייט אַ פֿאַס.  
אין דער פֿאַס געפֿינט זיך וויין  
וואָס איז עלטער ווי מען ווייסט.  
געמאַכט פֿון טרויבן פֿון אַ ווייַזשטאַק  
פֿונעם סאַמע ערשטן גאַרטן.  
דער וויין איז ויס. דער וויין איז גוט  
נאָר קיינער האָט אים נישט פֿאַרוכט  
און קיינער וועט אים נישט פֿאַרוכט  
ביז צום לעצטן טאָג.

In a deep cellar stands a barrel./In the barrel is old  
wine/Which is older than you think./In every red drop



of wine/Opens up a wide abyss./In each abyss are  
born/universes every moment./In every young uni-  
verse/Galaxies of stars are turning./Round every blazing  
star/Tiny motes of dust are whirling./On every dustmote  
grows a world/Of colors, scents and sounds./Mosses,  
lizards, human beings./On every world someone  
lives/Who's occupied with magic only./This person  
owns a house./Below the house, steps lead/To a cellar  
deep down./In the cellar stands a barrel./In the barrel  
there is wine/Which is older than is known./Made from  
grapes from a vine/From the very earliest garden./The  
wine is sweet, the wine is good/But no one has tasted it,  
and no one will taste it/Till the end of days.

(First published 1990)

**MENKE**

(For Rivke)

מעניקע

פֿאַר רִבֿקה

מעניקע פֿלעגט שמועסן  
מיט גוטע-פֿריינד, מיט קרובֿים  
און מיט ווילד פֿרעמדע,  
דערגייענדיק  
דאָס פינטעלע מענטש  
און דאָס פינטעלע באָהעם.

ער פֿלעגט האַרציק זינגען.  
פֿריילעך שפּילן אויף דער מאַנדאָלין,  
און שאַפֿן שורות  
וואָס זענען, ווי די שענסטע נאָטורזאַכן  
— אַ שנייעלע, אַ וואַלפֿיש, צי אַ באָרג —  
סיי קלאַסיש, סיי פֿאַנטאַסטיש.

ער פֿלעגט אַרומגיין  
אין טיפֿסטן, שאַטנדיקסטן וואַלד,  
ווי אין אַן אייגענעם ווינגאַרטן;  
און פֿלעגט זיך איינהערן  
אין רייד פֿון רושיקע, צעטאַנצטע ריטשקעס,  
ווי זיי וואַלטן אים געווען  
אייגענע שוועסטער, ברידער;  
און מיטגיין פֿלעגט ער מיט זיי אין געדאַנק  
צום ווייטן ים.

און אומעסטום האָט ער געזען, געהערט  
מאָדנע ווונדער.

Menke chatted/With friends, with family/And utter  
strangers/Probing the essentially human/And essen-  
tially Bohemian.

He sang from the heart,/Played gaily on the man-  
dolin,/And fashioned verses/Which are—like the  
most beautiful things in nature/(A snowflake, whale

or mountain)—/Both classic and fantastic.

He roamed about/In the deepest and most shadowy  
forest/As if in his own vineyard;/And used to listen/To  
the speech of rushing, wildly dancing streams/As if  
they were his sisters and his brothers:/And in his  
thoughts he walked with them/To the far sea.

And everywhere he saw and heard/Strange wonder.

(May 1993; first published 1995)

<sup>1</sup> The translations, from the Yiddish, are by the author.

**Helen Mintz**

**IKH BIN FROI / I AM WOMAN**

Who are we as late-twentieth-century Jewish  
women? What is the legacy of strength, wisdom, pain,  
and courage we have inherited from the women who  
came before us? How better to know ourselves than  
through our stories?

My one-woman show, using the form of the high-  
ly dramatized Yiddish folktale, is a document of  
search and discovery of a strong female voice in the  
eastern European Jewish tradition. I invite the audi-  
ence to laugh, cry, and celebrate with me as I rebuild  
the link with my own past. In this way, I bring the rich  
Yiddish tradition to an English-speaking audience.

My starting point is my own history. All four of  
my grandparents came to North America from eastern  
Europe at the beginning of the century, but my rela-  
tionship with the places of their birth has been trun-  
cated. I have names, but not even a place to which I  
can point on a map. I have dissociated stories of their  
pride and strength in living the complexity of a day-to-  
day life. But I carry also their silence in the face of the  
enormous brutality and loss that was the Holocaust.

I set out to find the stories of my grandmothers;  
the stories of other Ashkenazi Jewish women. I speak  
with Jewish seniors; I read voraciously. I begin with  
Yiddish folktales but am enormously frustrated by the  
implicit or explicit misogyny in most of the tales.  
But the women I meet at Jewish seniors centers share  
their stories with me; stories of women's wisdom. And  
the ethnological expeditions organized in Europe by  
YIVO and presented to an English-speaking audience  
by Beatrice (Bina) Weinreich in her wonderful book  
*Yiddish Folktales* give us a vivid picture of a woman  
storyteller of the time as well as examples of stories  
with strong, visionary Jewish folk heroines. I glory in  
the dance of telling these stories.

Fortunately, the search for strong Jewish women's  
voices leads me to the wealth of absolutely wonderful  
Yiddish women's writing. I discover, for the first time,

Rochl Korn, Kadia Molodovsky, Celia Margolin, Chava Rosenfarb, Malka Heifetz Tussman. These are strong Jewish women's voices I'd never dreamed existed. I find my foremothers. I am shocked by the enormity of the body of this work; I am thrilled by the deep power of the writing. I struggle again with my inadequate Yiddish; I thrill to begin to form the words of these women, to hear the rich eloquence of their language through my lips.

And then I search for the experience of Jewish lesbians in my historic past. I wonder, are my Jewish lesbian friends and I an historic aberration? I know this is not possible, and yet nowhere do I find stories of Jewish lesbians before me. And then I discover the historic novel Elana Dykewoman is writing, an epic story about the experience of Jewish women, many of them lesbians, starting in eastern Europe and moving to North America. I glory in telling the story of Gutke, a midwife in 1880s Kishinev, going to her first women's party and meeting the woman with whom she will share her life. I celebrate her story; I celebrate taking a firmer hold of the ropes connecting my life backward into my own history.

I begin to search for the stories of women of the Holocaust. I am haunted by the expression, heard so

often in my childhood, "like sheep to the slaughter." For the first time, I begin to examine the ways in which that expression defined my understanding of the Jewish response to Nazi aggression, the shame that lived so deep in me. And through story, with great humility, I explore Jewish women's experience in the Holocaust, the enormous pain, brutality, and loss but also the pride, strength, and courage of these women. And through the telling and retelling of these stories I internalize an understanding that the Jewish response to Nazi aggression was as varied as human possibility. And in every situation Jews resisted. And then I am able to look at other peoples who are experiencing attempted genocide. And I remember that bedrock morality of my Jewish upbringing: "never again," not for Jews, not for anyone. Never again. I begin to speak of the people of the former Yugoslavia, of Cambodia, of Rwanda, of Tibet.

I finish with the first two sections of Irena Klepfisz's poem "Bashert," which pays tribute to the people of the Holocaust. Through the words of her poem I honor all in our struggle to live in the best way possible. I honor the women and men of my Yiddish-speaking past and the gifts they've given me, the legacy they've bequeathed me: a struggle for honesty and justice.



HELEN MINTZ

Photo: © Layle Silbert 1997



## SESSION II

### Panels

#### **Lebensveg/Shaping a Woman's Life: In the Home and on the Page**

*Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Chair*

Paula Hyman

#### **MEMOIRS AND MEMORIES: EAST EUROPEAN JEWISH WOMEN RECOUNT THEIR LIVES**

Where can we find the voices of women? This is the question that has frustrated those historians who have realized that a history based on the experience and views of men alone is at best incomplete and, more likely, hopelessly flawed. In the premodern period, women appear in traditional Jewish sources primarily when they present legal problems that must be resolved; marriage, divorce, and their complications frequently engaged rabbinic figures. Occasionally, learned men commented on the piety of their wives. Consequently, we have learned from recent scholarship a great deal about rabbinic views of women and what those views suggest about fundamental Jewish values, but the experience of women is always filtered through a male lens (see, for example, Wegner 1988 and Boyarin 1994). Simply put, women did not participate in the creation of traditional Jewish texts. Even women's *tkhines*, the petitionary prayers in Yiddish that were printed in large numbers from the end of the sixteenth century and which have been interpreted so brilliantly by Chava Weissler, were written primarily, though not exclusively, by men (see, for example, Weissler 1987a, 1987b, 1991).

Historians of women who explore social and cultural developments in the modern period are more fortunate than our colleagues working in the more distant past. Women of the modern period have written memoirs, fiction, and poetry in unprecedented numbers; and the techniques of oral history have permitted women of all backgrounds to relate their life experiences and interpret them (for a creative use of oral history and memoirs, see Weinberg 1988 and Glenn 1990). When I began to study Jewish women in nineteenth-century eastern Europe and, particularly, their roles in accommodating to modern culture in a period of transition, I hunted for memoirs. These, I felt, would offer me not only the life histories of a handful of women but also their self-understanding.

There is no established canon of Jewish women's autobiography. In fact, there is no medieval tradition of Jewish autobiography. No Jewish counterpart to Augustine appeared; the individual remained subordinate to the collectivity, the people Israel. The intro-

spective autobiographical mode does not make its appearance until the early seventeenth century, when Leon Modena of Venice completed his Hebrew memoirs. Glikl of Hameln, who wrote in Yiddish between 1691 and 1715, left the sole memoir written by a woman. In both these cases, however, the memoir remained in manuscript, not to be published until late in the nineteenth century in the case of Glikl and the early twentieth century in the case of Leon Modena (see Cohen 1988 and Lowenthal 1977).

As Alan Mintz has demonstrated, Jewish men began to write autobiographies and autobiographical fiction in the years of the Haskalah and post-Haskalah, from the midnineteenth century to the early twentieth (Mintz 1989). Male Jewish intellectuals had read Rousseau and Solomon Maimon, the Polish Jew who penned in German his tale of joining the culture of Enlightenment late in the eighteenth century (Maimon 1988). They wrote soul-searching explorations of their break with Jewish religious tradition, of the deleterious impact of the traditional Jewish cultural world upon their psyches, and later of their disillusionment with the political strategies of the Haskalah. Working within the linguistic and cultural tradition of the Haskalah, however, they wrote in Hebrew. Hebrew was the masculine language of Jewish tradition: A modernized, secular Hebrew signified the assertion of Jewish dignity and the emergence of Jews onto the stage of modern civilized peoples (Mintz 1989, pp. 25-54; Biale 1992, pp. 149-75).

Jewish women wrote their memoirs within a different cultural and historical framework. Women were not equal partners in the world of Haskalah. Although they, too, departed increasingly from religious observance, they did not confront secular culture within the walls of the yeshiva. They did not feel the pull between two distinct intellectual traditions contending for their souls. By the end of the nineteenth century, girls from traditional families were more likely than their brothers to study in secular public or private schools while their formal Jewish education remained minimal and their Jewish practice largely domestic. For the most part, the only Jewish language with which they felt comfortable was Yiddish. The Jewish women who identified with the Jewish community and wrote about their experiences of life in Russia, Poland, and Austrian Galicia in the last part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth naturally chose Yiddish as their language of self-presentation.

I would like to share with you a handful of

women's memoirs of that period in order to let you see how women who chose to write about themselves constructed the contours of their life. I will refer to four memoirs, one written by a woman active in Jewish public life, Puah Rakowski; two by women who did not leave a public record alongside their memoirs, Hinda (Rosenblatt) Bergner and Fanny Edelman; and the last by a private personality known primarily for a family connection to fame, Sheyne (Mabovitch) Korngold, the older sister of Golda Meir. All four were born between 1865 and 1889 and wrote and published their memoirs in their old age (see Rakowski 1954, Bergner 1946, Edelman 1948, Korngold 1970).

There are only a few patterns that can be discerned in these memoirs other than their common language, their East European location, and the fact that none is a confessional autobiography in the manner of Rousseau. Each author sees her task differently, although all reflect upon a Jewish society that no longer exists. In presenting her own life, each comments, whether directly or indirectly, on the social attitudes that shaped women's lives. The publication of these memoirs in Canada, Argentina, the United States, and Israel testifies to the dispersion of Jewish life and of Yiddish publishing in the twentieth century.

In her book *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988), Carolyn Heilbrun describes "the old genre of female autobiography" as one which forbids women "anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one's life" (pp. 12-13). Heilbrun chooses May Sarton's *Journal of a Solitude*, published in 1973, as a watershed female autobiography because in it she sees a deliberate choice to express anger and pain without framing them as redemptive.

Yet at least some of the Yiddish memoirs of women who were born into traditional Jewish homes in the last third of the nineteenth century derive their energy precisely from anger at their situation. Their narratives reflect their efforts, not all successful, to exert a measure of control over the conditions of their lives. I will focus on two sources of their anger: the failure of their families to provide the education they so strongly desired and the constraints imposed by arranged marriages.

Puah Rakowski provides the most eloquent expression of this anger. Born in Bialystok in 1865 to a fifteen-year-old mother and seventeen-year-old father, she became the well-known director of a Jewish girls' school in Warsaw, a translator and journalist, and a Zionist and feminist activist before making aliyah to Palestine in 1935. Although she wrote her memoir in her old age, the tone in which she tells of her education bristles with a combination of pride in her accomplishments and resentment of her father's disappointment that she was a daughter rather than a son. In her case, as in others, the disparity she felt between her own sta-

tus and that of a brother fuels her sense of injustice. Sent to a local *kheyder* (Jewish primary school) for her preliminary education, she soon exhausted the knowledge of the *melamed* (teacher), who proclaimed that she was a far better student than her younger brother. Her father acceded to the teacher's recommendation that they hire a special tutor for her (Rakowski 1954, pp. 15-20). Rakowski reports her father's commenting ruefully on her intellectual talents, "It's a shame you were born a girl and not a boy" (p. 19).

Similarly, Hinda Rosenblatt Bergner recounts in her fragmentary memoirs, privately printed by her sons, her repeated efforts to continue her education after she completed primary school rather than take charge of the accounts in her father's grain business. She was born about 1875 and grew up, the youngest daughter of six surviving children, in the Galician town of Redim. One section of her memoir is entitled, "My father loved me, but he didn't permit studying." So strong was her reaction to her father's ban on further education that he took her to a rabbi in the nearby city of Jaroslav "to bless me so that I would no longer be angry with him." When the rabbi asked why she refused to be reconciled with her father, she replied, "My father hits me" (Bergner 1946, p. 18). Looking back at her youth, she reveals her ambivalence about her efforts to acquire an education, referring to her "childish strong will to study" that led her to fight with her parents in order "to achieve my dreams." Running off to Jaroslav in pursuit of her desire to study, she recalls thinking, "young as I was then," that she would not stand in the way of her own children's education. It was her father's tears that finally persuaded her to return home, where her eagerness to learn was partially and temporarily satisfied by private French lessons. Her dreams of a higher education, however, were to be fulfilled only by her sons (pp. 23-24).

Sheyne Korngold (born 1889), the oldest of three surviving daughters of a poor skilled carpenter, lived in a home characterized by hunger and despair. As she puts it in her memoir, "I look in my memory for one ray of hope and do not find it. The future is hazy. Sorrow, worry. More than once — hitting and cursing" (Korngold 1970, p. 25). Although still a child and despite the family's poverty, she resisted her mother's desire to apprentice her to a seamstress or a milliner. She envied the gymnasium students strolling in their uniforms in the streets of Kiev; the various colors of their dresses and aprons and their white collars remained in her memory as her stimulus to study. She does not remember precisely how she found out about a local school for poor Jewish children or how she registered, but she is certain that neither her father nor her mother was responsible for her enrolling in the school that made her into "a normal *mentsh*" and "formed [her] personal-

ity" (pp. 40-42; quotations, pp. 41 and 42). While Korngold's story of her quest for education is less dramatic than either Rakowski's or Bergner's, that she credits her school, rather than her parents, for the person she became suggests that she allowed herself to acknowledge their failure to provide her with her basic sense of self.

The second source of the anger that erupts in a number of these memoirs is the custom of arranged marriage. For Puah Rakowski and Hinda Rosenblatt the *shidekh* (match) seals their fate insofar as studying is concerned: A married woman in a traditional Jewish milieu must attend to her household and contribute to its economic survival. Fanny Edelman, raised in an observant family in the Galician *shtetl* of Tamoroda, finds the prospect of an arranged marriage a sufficient spur to activate her plans for emigration to America (Edelman 1948, pp. 1, 19).

Puah Rakowski's adolescent immersion in the joy of learning with tutors was brought to an abrupt end at the age of fifteen when her parents, at her mother's instigation, began to look for a *khosn* (bridegroom) for her so that she would not become an old maid. Her mother also worried that her daughter would never be tranquil as long as she remained single. As Rakowski referred to the events in her memoirs, "Then began my true misery." Without her knowledge, her parents proceeded to find an appropriate candidate to be her husband, a man ten years her senior. She protested to her parents that she was not ready to marry, but to no avail. "Mamma," she complained, "What do you really want from me? I do not want any *khosn*, and I will not travel to any *tnoyim* (formal engagement ceremony). Leave me alone. I don't have time. I need first to study" (Rakowski 1954, pp. 28, 31). This argument failed to persuade her parents to change their minds; in fact, one of the goals of the marriage was to bring her behavior into line with the expectations for young women of good family. Her tears upon hearing of the match and the tears that she shed publicly at the *tnoyim* ceremony itself did not succeed in altering the decision about her marriage. Only her Hebrew tutor understood her distress. When he came to wish *mazl tov* to her parents a few days after the *tnoyim* were signed, he added, "I would have been satisfied to deliver my *mazl tov* five years later" (p. 33).

Rakowski's parents succeeded in bringing her under the *khupa* (bridal canopy) at the age of sixteen, but within several years she took control of her own fate. After the birth of two children, she persuaded her husband and parents to permit her to live with her grandparents and acquire the credentials that would enable her to support the family while her husband, who had lost her dowry, continued to learn Talmud. Upon finishing her courses, she demanded a divorce. After encountering several years of family refusal to

consider her demand, she hit upon a surefire tactic to achieve her goal. Her threat to convert and to convert her children as well compelled her reluctant husband, along with her parents and grandparents, to accede to her wishes. At the age of twenty-three she moved to Warsaw with her children, once again to lead a non-tranquil and active life as a single woman — though she did marry twice more, but for love (pp. 40-61).

Hinda Rosenblatt's parents did not wait until she reached the advanced age of fifteen to begin looking for a match for her. About the time that she ran away to the city to study, when she was eleven, discussions of dowries and her father's boast to a *shadkhn* (matchmaker) that he could provide funds immediately and arrange a wedding within two weeks, terrified her. Like Rakowski, she connected her early marriage with the end of her studies. She recounted both her situation and her mood in the reminiscences that she wrote for her children and grandchildren:

Despite the fact that my father had taken advantage of me for the sake of his business for almost my entire childhood, I had sneakily put aside German and Polish books which I read at night in bed by the light of a small candle. And now, abruptly, the frightful prospect of a wedding! Inconceivable — my husband with a beard and long *peyes* [sidelocks] and me in a *shaytl* [wig], instead of my long blond braids. I wrung my hands and wept for my lost dreams and my ideal of getting higher education and surpassing my friends. (Bergner 1946, p. 27)

Rosenblatt succeeded in forestalling a *shidekh* until she was sixteen, convinced by then that she would remain an old maid (p. 77).

Unlike the other authors, Fanny Edelman, at a young age, emigrated from her Galician *shtetl* to America without her parents. In fact, she presents her decision to emigrate as motivated in large part by her desire to avoid an arranged marriage. When an older sister had protested that a proposed *khosn* did not appeal to her, her opposition to the match and her weeping did not prevent the marriage from taking place. In Edelman's words, "My father was a strict Jew, and we were simply afraid of him." Moreover, he was fond of telling his six daughters, "I want no old maids on my hands." Edelman first heard about America when she was fourteen years old, and she linked the freedom of the *goldene medine* not to economic opportunity or political equality but to the free choice of a husband. As she wrote, "I used to fantasize that in America I would be able to fall in love and marry someone who pleased me rather than be forced to live with whomever my strict father would bring me for a husband." America, she felt, was her "only salvation" (Edelman 1948, pp. 19-20). And she saw a chance for that salvation as she approached sixteen. At

that time her brother-in-law, who had gone to America a year before, sent passage for his wife and child. Using all of her powers of persuasion, Edelman succeeded in getting her father's permission to accompany her sister to America, where she did in fact choose her own husband (pp. 21-22).

America meant freedom to Fanny Edelman, but to Sheyne Mabovitch it meant abandoning all that was dear to her — her studies and Shammai, the young man with whom she had fallen in love. Because Mabovitch was younger than the other authors and had lived in cities (Kiev and Pinsk), she was heavily influenced by the radical political movements of her time. Her *khaverim* (comrades) in the Zionist-Socialist (S.S.) party at the time of the Revolution of 1905 provided a social network that encouraged cultural as well as political radicalism. In addition to engaging in dangerous, illegal political activity, they consciously broke with their parents' traditional religious practices and social customs, flaunting their independence of the constraints imposed by the older generation. Choosing one's spouse was taken for granted. But when her father sent for his wife and children to join him in America, a sense of family obligation, as the oldest child, persuaded the sixteen-year-old Sheyne that she had no choice but to go. In her words, "I had to share the family's destiny" (Korngold 1970, pp. 58-60, 64-77; quotation, p. 77). Fortune smiled on her, however. Her beloved Shammai was forced to flee Russia within months of her departure after he was arrested by the czarist authorities. He headed for America. Mabovitch helped fortune along, however, by contacting Shammai in New York; their epistolary relationship led to his joining her in Milwaukee and, after a bout with tuberculosis, to their marriage in Denver (pp. 103-24).

So what do these memoirs offer us? First and foremost, in response to my initial question, in memoirs we hear the voices of women, remembering and reflecting on what they felt to be important in their lives. These memoirs provide an opportunity to investigate how women living in eastern Europe understood the choices available to them and how some developed strategies precisely to take control of their lives and achieve their goals. They give us a glimpse of Jewish family life in eastern Europe generally unsanitized by nostalgia. Reading them seriously, even though they have not attained the canonical status of the autobiographies of the *maskilim*, will permit us to compare the experiences, self-understanding, and memory formation of Jewish women and men as they confronted the challenges of modernity in its East European guise.

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#### Eve Jochowitz

#### HEALTH, REVOLUTION, AND A YIDISHE TAM: READING YIDDISH VEGETARIAN COOKBOOKS AS WOMEN'S LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

*A sach mol ven men filt vi der mogn brent, ken men dos brenen baruigen mit trinken a bisl vasser, lolt vifl es fodert zich. — Mokholim tsum gezunt, p. 33*

When we feel our stomach is burning, we could stop that burning with a little cool water. It is well worth the price tag. — *Food For Health Cookbook*, p. 42

Malky Eisenberger's *Mokholim tsum gezunt* and her English edition, *Food for Health*, is the only cookbook I have ever read with an entire chapter devoted to the subject of water: With instructions for drinking, washing, bathing, remedies, hot tea on a cold night, Eisenberger's basic cookbook begins with the most basic ingredient. There are other ways in which this book is different from all other cookbooks. *Mokholim tsum gezunt*, written and published in 1991 in Yiddish

by a Chasidic woman primarily for Chasidic women, is a macrobiotic, almost vegetarian, mostly vegan cookbook. The only sweetener used is apple juice. The bread is made with whole wheat flour. And the cholent includes aduki beans, believed in macrobiotic theory to have special medicinal powers. Eisenberger has received testimonials from readers who have become healthier and more energetic from following her diet. "Before I read your book," writes one correspondent, "I didn't have what to eat." Others have called and written to say that they have changed from a standard diet to a more natural one since reading *Food For Health*. In effect, Malky Eisenberger has become for her followers a laic *rebe* of the body.

Before I go on, I would like to explain for a minute why I am speaking about this particular cookbook at this particular conference. As much as I have always taken great pleasure in cookbooks, I didn't always understand how very crucial cookbooks are to women and to anyone with a genuine interest in history. For me, reading Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's article "Kitchen Judaism" (see the bibliography at the end of this paper), which follows the development of the Jewish community in America through the development of Jewish cookbooks, was a feast of reason. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and other pioneering women historians have claimed the cookbook as documentary evidence of women's work and history. It would not be unreasonable to guess that the feminist movement and the advent of women's studies would have seized upon the cookbook as a document of women's writing and creativity, but this seems not always to have been the case. To choose one interesting example, the May 1975 issue of *Lilith's Rib*, the Chicago newsletter that was the precursor to *Lilith* magazine, has model haggadas from feminist seders. One such haggadah suggests an alternative seder plate with these symbols of women's oppression: a wig, a girdle, a typewriter (it must have been a pretty big plate), and a cookbook. The inclusion of a cookbook along with objects of oppression reflects an acceptance of a bogus sexist model for the value of women's work.

Malky Eisenberger, a Chasidic wife and mother of twelve, was moved, when she still had eight small children at home, to write a vegetarian cookbook in Yiddish. The book is a very personal work full of hand-drawn illustrations, little poems, and bits of kitchen wisdom: "Many wonder why/Onions make us cry./Maybe those wet tears/Help relax us from our fears" (1991, p. 115). Like the household manuals of the last century, the book combines recipes with remedies and homemaking secrets. Eisenberger tells how to get static out of a child's hair (Rub a drop of olive oil into the bristles of the hairbrush), how to keep your feet warm (Sprinkle a bit of cayenne pepper in shoes), and how to care for a wig (Style with

sugar water). The section on wig care is an indication that the target audience of the book is Orthodox women. It is also the only time sugar is called for.

Malky Eisenberger was born in Europe shortly after World War II to parents who had spent their teenage years in concentration camps. Her father, a rabbi from Munkacz (in the former Ruthenia; now part of Ukraine), and her mother, a teacher from Sigit, Romania, married after their liberation. Eisenberger is their oldest child. The family came to the United States and settled in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, in New York City, when Malky was two years old. There she attended yeshiva at Bes Klausenberg and Bes Pupa and her two younger sisters and six younger brothers were born. She resists the suggestion that she developed her skills by taking care of eight younger siblings. "I didn't think I had any skills until recently. I was always interested in food, but never a fussy eater. We had the usual things back then: potatoes and chicken for dinner, bread and eggs for breakfast. My favorite taste was probably halvah. There was not so much junk going around then."

Eisenberger got her first spark of interest in health food when she became concerned with keeping her children healthy. Two books that were to prove pivotal in her development as a cook and laic doctor were *Let's Raise Healthy Children*, by Adele Davis, and *Back to Eden*, by Jethro Kloss. She was particularly impressed by the Davis book and gradually eliminated more and more meat. She did not intend to become a vegetarian, but it happened, and she set about converting her husband, her parents, and all twelve of her children. I had the chance to meet her mother, who told me herself how much more energetic she feels since switching to a natural diet.

It was Eisenberger's father who suggested she try writing a book when she told him how impressed she was by all she had learned. As she cooked, she started by writing down the recipes she felt were most important. While she was still collecting recipes, she started adding little stories about her family to illustrate her points. From the beginning she hoped the collection would someday become a book, but did not really believe it would happen. When she could not find an agent, she chose to typeset and publish her work at her own expense. Eisenberger distributes the books herself and has recently opened a store, Health Foods And Ideas, where the books are available. In a way, the book's humble exterior goes with the recipes within. While some of the recipes are touchingly modest (barley and carrot soup calls for barley, carrots, water, and salt), all use natural ingredients. No margarine here.

Both Orthodox Jews and vegetarians are people who define themselves, to a great extent, by what they eat. There are fascinating layers and levels of observance and adherence to the laws of *kashres* (or of veg-



etarianism) for different communities and even individuals. Kosher cookbooks of different Orthodox communities emphasize entirely different aspects of *kashres*, while certain animal products are less offensive to some vegetarians than others. Vegetarianism occupies a very slippery position within Orthodox Judaism and especially within Chasidism.

Jack Kugelmass and others have noted the disdain in which vegetarianism is held in ultra-Orthodox communities. There are several reasons for this. Too much concern for the welfare of animals is unseemly from a Chasidic point of view. Kugelmass quotes a Skverer Chasid who points out that by eating a cow and performing *mitsves* (religious commandments) a Jew raises the cow to a higher level of being. (Kugelmass 1992, 49) One is entitled, in this belief system, to abstain from meat only for reasons of taste. Misguided compassion for the cow is utterly out of place. Who could be more compassionate than the Almighty? This approach does not take into account the very different effects of a meat and a vegetable diet. Eisenberger's response is to the point: "If you really practice religion, then you enjoy and love the truth, and nothing is closer to truth than being natural. . . . When you eat meat you are ready to go right to bed, but on a vegetarian diet you have more energy and also more brainpower to do more of Hashem's *mitsves*."

Even more ominous than misplaced compassion is the religion and mysticism that is seen, in some circles, to go hand in hand with vegetarianism. Eisenberger owns a copy of *Macrobiotic Cooking for Everyone*, by Edward and Wendy Esko, but she has crossed out all references to spirituality and the origins of the earth. By this approach she demonstrates that one may adopt the ingredients and methods of macrobiotic cooking but completely reject any part of the philosophy that is inconsistent with Orthodoxy. Although *kashres* is not something for individuals to play around with, a reading of a few contemporary Chasidic cookbooks shows that it can be manipulated enormously, depending on what one chooses to emphasize.

The best-selling cookbook in Borough Park<sup>2</sup> is *The Haimishe Kitchen*, published by the Ladies' Auxiliary of Nitra, a Hungarian Chasidic group in upstate New York. The Nitra Cookbook, as its users call it, is a frequent topic of conversation at neighborhood markets. The Nitra publication includes seven pages of recommended precautions to take in using vegetables and not one word about precautions in using meat. Since one's kosher butcher is above suspicion and takes care of all meat-related concerns, all of an Orthodox cook's *kashres* anxiety, for centuries centered on meat, now focuses on the vegetables.<sup>3</sup>

Brussels sprouts are very frequently infested and may not be used without a careful inspection of

each leaf. . . . Slice and check radishes for tunnels. . . . It is not advisable to use asparagus because they cannot be properly examined. [!] . . . Both curly and regular parsley are very frequently infested and may not be used without an extremely careful and thorough inspection. The amount of time and experience required make this inspection virtually impractical. The following are ways of using parsley. As a garnish — line the platter with parsley in the usual manner and cover with Saran wrap. Place the food item on top of the Saran wrap. In soups — put the parsley in a cloth bag and tie well. This method of cooking allows the flavor and nutrients in while sealing the insects out. [Of course, the flavor and nutrients of the insects would get in.] . . . Kohlrabi may be used without any checking whatsoever. Cut off and discard the leaves. Rinse the bulb and use. (Nitra 1977, pp. 6-11).

Kohlrabi is the only vegetable identified as being completely safe. Astoundingly, the cookbook does not contain one recipe that calls for this heaven-sent vegetable.

The *kashres* anxiety of *Spice and Spirit*, the very popular cookbook from the Lubavitch Women's Organization (LWO), seems to center on milk products. Margarine and nondairy creamer are called for in all recipes that would normally require butter and milk *even when the recipes themselves are already milkhik (dairy)*. Readers are warned not to buy prepared *milkhik* products even if they are kosher. "Commercial bread containing dairy ingredients *presents kashrut problems*. [emphasis mine] Consult an orthodox rabbi before purchasing or using any dairy bread" (LWO, 1990, p. 18). No reason is given. A recipe for cheesecake (p. 109) includes cream cheese and margarine as well as canned pie filling.

These cookbooks contain detailed presentations of Jewish law as well as recipes, and with good reason. By the time kosher food arrives at the table, it has gone through several stages of strict rabbinic supervision in processing and packaging. All this supervision is not worth a thing if the cook who prepares the food is the least bit careless or ignorant of halacha (Jewish religious law). In this sense, in the kosher home, it is the housewife who is the ultimate *mashgiakh* (supervising rabbi).

The canned and packaged vegetables and fruits are not only shortcuts. They protect the kosher cook from unexamined produce. They also protect her from just about anything fresh or natural. Starting from very different places, Chasidic housewives and the Japanese housewives described by Theodore Bestor (NYU lecture, 1993) have both evolved to the point where the food that makes them the most uncomfortable are fresh fruits and vegetables. Eisenberger says, "Many of the shortcuts end up taking more time themselves. I always enjoyed cooking. Some people are afraid to cook. They are afraid they will get their gas ranges dirty. They just don't see what it is all about."

Even Jennie Grossinger, in her famous Jewish

cookbook, dismisses vegetables with the words "Vegetables are comparatively unimportant in most Jewish homes" (p. 115). It looks as if Chasidic Orthodoxy, Yiddish culture, and a natural diet are not compatible, but *Food for Health* follows a small but significant body of cookbooks in Yiddish devoted to vegetarian cooking. Especially notable is *Vegetarish-dietetisher kokhbukh* (Vegetarian-dietetic cookbook), by Fania Lewando. Written in Poland in 1938, this book is filled with surprisingly sophisticated vegetarian recipes (tomatoes provençal, rice with strawberries) and lavish illustrations. A foreword, "*Tsu di balebuste* (To the housewife)," explains that fruits and vegetables are much healthier for the "organism" than meat dishes. Lena Brown's *Kokhbukh far gezunthayt* (Cookbook for health), written in the United States in the same period, also emphasizes the health benefits of a vegetarian diet.

The recipes in *Food for Health*, a sample of which follow, are a combination of traditional eastern Ashkenazic Jewish cooking, macrobiotic-type health food cooking, and some touches that are Eisenberger's own. Something that can definitely be called a cuisine emerges when the recipes are examined.

**Almond milk:** Almonds are boiled in water, pureed, and strained. This recipe from the macrobiotic repertoire is perfectly suited to be a pareve substitute for milk that is also a natural food.

**Almonds with apples:** Grated apples mixed with ground almonds. The combination of flavors is Jewish, but the simplicity of the recipe is pure Eisenberger.

**Black eye peas:** Macrobiotic. It is very interesting that she recommends these beans especially for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Black eye peas are a traditional African-American and southern American New Year food.

**Borscht:** Jewish. Raw borscht (*rosol*; slightly fermented beet brine), made of beets infused in cold water with salt.

**Buckwheat fills a red pepper.** Jewish. Buckwheat and shredded carrots, seasoned with cayenne and a tiny bit of cinnamon are served in a raw red pepper and topped with dill. "Indulge in something very nutritious and heart warming."

**Khale** (challah): Jewish. Eisenberger provides a twelve-page recipe with detailed instructions and illustrations reminiscent of Julia Child's twelve-page recipe for bread in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (Child, 1970).

**Cholent:** Jewish. A combination of Azuki beans, navy beans, garlic, barley, a quarter of a chicken, and an eighth of a turkey. This recipe may be the key to the whole collection. Azuki beans, believed to have special healing properties, are almost unknown outside

health-food circles.

**Cream of corn:** Pureed fresh-cooked corn kernels. What a wonderful idea! M. F. K. Fisher has a similar recipe in *With Bold Knife and Fork*.

**Dinner in a bowl of soup:** Jewish. Onion, parsley root, carrots, rice, millet, wheat berries, navy beans, salt, and water.

**Egg cookies:** Jewish. Traditional *ayer kikhlekh*, made with whole wheat flour and a bit of cayenne pepper.

**Esrog:** Jewish. Unsweetened pear and *esrog* (citron) preserves.

**Gefilte fish:** Jewish. Pike and whitefish are combined with seven eggs.

**Halvah:** Jewish. Two versions are offered, one with apple butter and one with carob powder and apple juice.

**Horseradish:** Jewish. "Let your nose keep its distance from the horseradish."

**Ices:** Whole frozen grapes, frozen banana slices, frozen mashed melon, strawberries frozen with apple juice or tofu, bananas mashed with tofu. (For children, frozen whole peas are recommended as well.)

**Mushroom, carrot, and rice soup:** Jewish. "Soup and mushroom is a pleasant combination, which is hard to explain in writing even with many adjectives."

**Radish salad:** Macrobiotic. Grated daikon radish with oil, lemon juice, and salt.

**Sour pickles.** Jewish. Cucumbers pickled in brine with onions, garlic, dill, and optional hot pepper.

**Tea:** Healing teas included are kukicka, recommended as a substitute for coffee; dandelion, to purify the blood; hyssop, for blood pressure; fenugreek, for cleansing; sage, for memory; slippery elm, for diarrhea; dill for hiccups and general healthfulness; and fig, for coughs.

**Tofu:** Macrobiotic. Home-made bean curd from soy-bean flour.

**Vegetarian kishke:** Jewish. Kitchen paper replaces the traditional intestinal lining, and the filling is made of whole wheat flour, oil, vegetables, and seasonings.

The recipes are simple, but some, like the bread, noodles, and home-made tofu, are very labor intensive. Almost all the recipes are standards from the macrobiotic canon or adaptations of eastern Ashkenazic Jewish classics. The quintessential Malky Eisenberger recipe, in light of which all the others make sense, is her *shabes* cholent. For the cholent, beef is replaced by the same combination she uses in her chicken soup: one quarter of a chicken and one eighth of a turkey.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in addition to the traditional navy beans and barley, the cholent contains azuki beans. These expensive red beans imported from Japan are believed by macrobiotics to have medicinal properties. Their presence is worth noting because they are not a substitute for anything else.



Both *kashres* and macrobiotics are very uneasy about meat, while neither system forbids meat outright. The *shabes* table at the Eisenberger home has cholent and soup made with chicken and turkey because Jewish custom calls for meat on *shabes* as a symbol of joy and comfort. In this case Jewish tradition overrules vegetarianism.

At the same time, the complete absence of potato recipes is a departure from Jewish tradition but not from custom, or *minhag*, which can be as binding as law. The Eisenberger never eats potatoes — not even during Passover. Potatoes are considered by macrobiotics to be the most dangerous members of the nightshade family of vegetables. Giving up potatoes is the most striking departure from traditional eastern Ashkenazic eating that Malky Eisenberger has made. While both meat and dairy foods are significant in eastern Ashkenazic cooking, it is potatoes that really define everyday food. Jennie Grossinger wrote that a potato *kugel* may be served at any meal (p. 115), and potatoes are disproportionately represented in all the Jewish cookbooks referred to in this paper.

While Eisenberger has eliminated most meat and dairy from her kitchen, there are recipes that call for eggs. As she writes: "Some vegetarians feel comfortable eating eggs; after all, eggs are not animal protein, it is just the egg. In our house, we eat eggs when we feel we want or need it. We live in a democracy" (p. 50). Eggs are animal products, but according to the laws of *kashres*, eggs are *parev* — they are classified as neither milk nor meat. Hence, eggs do not provoke the same kind of *kashres* anxiety as meat or dairy products and are considered not even to be animal protein.

Eisenberger's own love of cayenne pepper, which may have its origins in her Hungarian roots, is another distinguishing characteristic of her cuisine. She built up her tolerance of the peppers gradually and advises readers to do the same.

Reading Eisenberger's cookbook provides a helpful view into the way one Chasidic woman has created a cuisine based on traditional Jewish cooking, modern health food theory, the strictest *kashres* observance, and her own tastes and styles. A comparison of her cookbook with contemporary Chasidic cookbooks and other vegetarian works in Yiddish shows that a talented manipulation of tradition is itself a tradition for Jewish women. As Malky herself says with a twinkle, "We Jews like to be in control of our lives. If we don't want to eat something we can say it is not kosher."

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<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Malky Eisenberger for agreeing to be interviewed for this paper. *Mokholim tsum gezunt* and *Food for Health* are both available at Eisenberger's Health Foods and Ideas, 4312 15th Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11219; (718) 851-6803.

<sup>2</sup>A community in Brooklyn, N.Y., with a very high percentage of Orthodox Jewish residents. — Eds.

<sup>3</sup>With the debatable exception of locusts, insects are *treyf* (nonkosher). — Eds.

<sup>4</sup>Eisenberger emphasized to me how little chicken and turkey she uses in the chicken soup she prepares every *shabes*, but for these small amounts, she maintains an entire set of *fleyshik* (meat) dishes, pots, table linens, and flatware: That is what a Jewish home is expected to have.

#### Shulamith Z. Berger

#### THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN *BALEBOSTE/HOUSEWIFE*: IMAGES OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISEMENTS IN THE YIDDISH PRESS OF THE 1920S AND 1930S

In the 1920s American companies were in a period of growth. They were trying to expand and find new markets for their products. Firms such as Maxwell House and Borden's turned to the immigrant press, particularly the Yiddish newspapers, to advertise their wares. The advertising campaigns were

designed to educate immigrant customers to become American consumers. Women were the primary target audience for the goods promoted in these ads, and as a consequence the ads feature women as key players in the domestic dramas they describe.

The ads portray a prototypical image of an idealized Jewish housewife, the "American *baleboste*." Advertisements in Yiddish newspapers, such as the *Forverts*, the *Morgen zhurnal*, and the *Yidishes tageblatt* from the 1920s and early 1930s, depict the *baleboste* as the consummate housekeeper. She is the head of the family on the home front. Her home is her workplace, and her work in her home is her profession. It is she who is responsible for creating and maintaining household harmony and for ensuring her family's health, welfare, prosperity, and success. For immigrant families, the road to these goals lay in learning how to shop, eat, clean, dress, and smell like middle-class Americans. The advertisements in the Yiddish press were influential in persuading immigrants to desire these goals and teaching them how to achieve their aspirations. In order to properly fulfill her duties in the home and to her family, the immigrant Jewish woman needed to be well-versed in American versions of the tools of her trade.

The roles in which women are typically portrayed in the ads are those of concerned and caring wives and mothers, and helpful friends and superlative hostesses. Indeed, although this is not the focus of my talk, it might be worthwhile to note that we may be witnessing the stereotype of the overbearing "Jewish mother" in its infancy here. A woman's key to success in the aforementioned roles is carefully sketched out in the ads in the Yiddish press. The *baleboste*, a term frequently used in the ads, is a superior housewife who cheerfully keeps her home, her dishes, and her family's clothes spotless and sparkling. She is a cook par excellence who values quality food yet manages to be thrifty and economical and an amateur doctor and nutritionist in the bargain. One of the advertisers' messages to women is that knowing which product to purchase and which brand to choose will insure that they will be able to serve as capable professional managers in the home. Women who perform their jobs well on the home front guarantee that their husbands and children will succeed in their ventures outside the home — on the job and in school.

The next few paragraphs summarize and offer some brief examples of how advertisers broadcast their messages to the immigrant market. In 1921, shortly after immigration to the United States resumed following World War I, Borden's created a series of ads entitled "to the new arrivals in America." One of the ads in this series informed the reader that "every president of the United States is a descendant of immigrants." The text went on to declare that America is a

land of equal opportunity for all but that the most intelligent people will be the most successful. A healthy body is a prerequisite for developing the intellect, and the mother who feeds her child Borden's milk is starting her child out on the road to success. There are many examples of this genre which promise healthy children who will excel in school and later in life by eating a particular food. These ads employ a veiled fear campaign as part of their selling technique: A mother who does not use these products is depriving her children, stunting their physical and intellectual growth and dooming their future.

Mother-child relationships are one of the most popular themes in the ads of this period. The following examples are typical of ads based on this theme. Mothers care for their children's health by using Lifebuoy soap to protect them from germs and disease. Bon-Ami cleansing powder employed images of a mother and daughter happily cleaning their bathroom to show how its product would help you keep your house clean and enable you to teach your daughter how to follow in your footsteps while at the same time creating an atmosphere of harmony and closeness.

Harmony is an essential ingredient in husband-wife relationships, another important family dynamic which appears in these ads. Serving your husband the right coffee and tasty cereal in the morning will insure that he will do well on the job, and serving him a good dinner will keep him healthy and happy. The *baleboste*'s culinary skills also enable her to be a good hostess who honors her guests by serving them delicious refreshments.

Ads often touted the labor- and time-saving aspects of their products and reassured women that their reputations as good housekeepers would not be sullied by feeding family and guests items like Sunshine Kosher Cookies. In addition to emphasizing the kashrut of these new, ready-made packaged treats, ads for this product promised the housewife that she would know exactly what she would find in the box she purchased, whereas when she baked cookies herself the threat of the cookies' tasting bad or coming out burned always loomed. Thus, using packaged foods or labor- and time-saving methods of doing household tasks did not mean that housewives were lowering their standards; on the contrary, ads emphasized that utilizing modern products guaranteed higher standards with less investment of time and effort on the part of the *baleboste*. An ad for Silver Dust, a laundry detergent, reminded women how difficult it was to wash clothes in Europe. The illustration in the ad shows a woman down on her knees at the bank of a river scrubbing clothes, and the text tells the reader: "Today you have the river in your own kitchen, and a new, efficient way to do laundry . . . when your *bobe* (grandmother) did the wash, your *zeyde* (grandfather) had to go without

dinner." Although the ad does not explicitly say so, it clearly implies that the new, modern method of washing clothes will not merely produce better results than the old one, it will leave a *baleboste* enough time to make her husband dinner and thereby improve her ability to take care of her family.

Women bought into the consumer culture created and promoted by these ads, presumably because the worldview they portrayed was an optimistic one which appealed to immigrants who were trying to find their way in America. Even in the 1930s with the advent of the Depression, ads for the Jewish market in the Yiddish press continued to declare their faith in the promise of America.

However, beneath the nearly idyllic veneer of these ads it is possible to discern some of the anxieties of the immigrant community. Immigrants and their children worried about fitting in and "making it" in America. Ads in Yiddish by large American companies showed the Yiddish reading public that these companies were trying to befriend those readers and make them feel welcome in America. The Maxwell House haggada is, of course, the most famous example of this trend. In a number of cases, companies went out of their way to make their products kosher and proudly paraded this information in their advertising.

The messages the ads delivered spoke to these first- and second-generation Americans and promised them an ostensibly better and easier way of life than they had known in Eastern Europe and one which they could not even have aspired to there. The ads held out the hope that one could be successful in America and still retain a strong Jewish identity. In the world of America as seen in the Yiddish ads, the worst problems were having a dirty bathroom or a bad cup of coffee. Use of the right product could overcome these woes and, by extension, poverty and generation gaps, and even create happy, smiling families. These ads functioned as a *vegvayzer*, a guide to life in America, particularly for women who took responsibility for their family's well-being in America. They took the messages in the ads to heart and directed their efforts and energies to caring for their homes and families.

### ***Foremothers: Rebels and Intellectuals***

*Ellen Garvey, Chair*

**Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild**

#### **ESTHER FRUMKIN: JEWISH WOMAN RADICAL IN EARLY SOVIET RUSSIA**

Esther Frumkin was arguably the most well-known woman in the Russian-Jewish revolutionary movement. Throughout her career, she gained as much notoriety as praise. Blamed for blocking attempts at the 1908 Czernowitz conference aimed at encouraging the worldwide study and popularization of Yiddish, she

embraced the Bolshevik Revolution, and led virulent antireligious attacks in the 1920s as a leader of the Communist party's Jewish Section. Her life is full of paradox. The granddaughter of rabbis, she passionately attacked rabbinical authority. A gifted linguist and advocate for Yiddish, she helped undermine the bases for a distinct Jewish language. An advocate for a separate Jewish working-class culture, she supported policies that accelerated assimilation. A fervent communist, she spent the last years of her life in a Stalinist labor camp. Her political choices were problematic; her life raises many questions for anyone concerned about the past and future of Yiddish and Yiddish culture.

In order to understand the world into which Esther Frumkin was born, it is important to understand the history of Jews in the Russian empire. Although there were isolated instances of Jewish settlement in Russia before then, the large majority of Jews fell under Russian rule with the partition of Poland at the end of the eighteenth century. The expansion west of the Russian empire led approximately 1.2 million Jews to be transferred from Polish to Russian sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> These Jews were characterized by poverty, cultural isolation, and population growth, and Russian government policies accentuated all three.

The Jews in the Pale had been settled there since the fifteenth century, when King Casimir of Poland had invited them to come to his country to build its economy. They were separated from the Slavic peasants by language, and from all the ethnic groups of the area by language, dress, and religion. As Esther Frumkin observed:

The Jewish worker [in Vilna] spends his [*sic*] whole life in a Yiddish-speaking environment; in the quarter in which he lives, the courtyard of his building, everyone speaks Yiddish: the milkman, the tailor, the shoemaker, the artisans in the workshops. In the national schools [where Russian was the language of instruction] the pupils spoke Yiddish in recess. Jewish businessmen did business in Yiddish. Yiddish was spoken in the Jewish hospital. There was a flourishing Yiddish press and theater. As the community had grown, so had the use of Yiddish. Charitable institutions, credit facilities, even the emigration bureau used Yiddish as the *lingua franca*.<sup>2</sup>

At the time of their annexation to the Russian empire the Jewish population was quite poor and with few economic resources. Although they had economic ties to the peasants who lived in the area, Jews were generally forbidden to live on or work the land, and generally eked out a meager living as craftspeople, artisans, or small shopkeepers. The czarist laws largely confined Jews to the Pale of Settlement, forbidding them to own land or live in villages, or serve in the government, and, after 1887, limiting their access to education. Further, the Pale included in the Northwest many forests, marshes and other areas which were

among the least fertile agricultural areas in Europe.<sup>3</sup> One observer noted in 1903 that "fully 80% of the Jewish population of Vilna do not know in the evening where they will obtain food the next morning."<sup>4</sup>

Jewish traditional society was sex-segregated to a large degree. Men had to be literate in Hebrew; those who devoted themselves to full-time prayer and Torah study had high standing in the community. Women's religious education or Hebrew literacy was not a priority. Women's roles were reproductive, religious and economic. Women were responsible for observance of Jewish law in the home, in addition to childrearing and domestic chores. Often the main support of their families, they sold goods in town or village markets or operated small shops in their homes. With industrialization, more women worked in factories and sweatshops.

No study of Jews in the Russian empire can ignore their extraordinary population explosion in the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the century, shortly after the partition of Poland, there were 1.0 million to 1.5 million Jews in the Russian empire. One hundred years later there were over 5.2 million. Their numbers continued to grow somewhat more slowly until 1914. This figure does not include the approximately 2 million Jews who emigrated to western Europe, the Americas, and Palestine. Thus, the Jewish population in and from the Russian empire increased 800 percent in just over a hundred years, and the number of Jews in the Russian empire was far greater than the entire world Jewish population in 1800. Although the overall population increased in the Russian empire, the Jews had the most dramatic rise.<sup>5</sup>

Conditions for Jews living in the Pale dramatically worsened after the assassination of the relatively liberal Czar Alexander II, in 1881, and the accession to the throne of Alexander III and then his son Nicholas II. Alexander III, as conservative as his father was liberal, blamed Jewish revolutionaries for his father's death. Official anti-Semitism, marked by deportations to the Pale (700,000 Jews residing east of the Pale were forced into the Pale by 1891), educational restrictions, such as numerical quotas for entry into schools and universities, and pogroms, increased.<sup>6</sup>

In response, approximately one third of all Russian Jews emigrated. Some responded by assimilation; some went even further and converted. Others fought for social justice and revolution, joining one of the revolutionary parties. But here again, many denied their Jewish identities and changed their Jewish-sounding names into more Russian ones, as for example, Lev Bronshtein did when he became Leon Trotsky.

Esther Frumkin did change her name, but the change did not cloak her Jewish identity. She was born Malka Lifschitz in 1880 in Minsk, the largest city in the White Russian part of the Russian empire. As with other cities in

the Pale of Settlement and in other East European countries, Minsk had a large Jewish population, more than half the residents of the city. Her father was a well-to-do merchant; her grandfather was a rabbi. Her father had received a Jewish and secular education; her parents arranged that Frumkin and her two sisters learn about both worlds. Thus, at an early age, Frumkin learned Hebrew and Yiddish and read modern Hebrew literary classics. In her adolescence, she attended a Russian gymnasium, where she read the great Russian novels and learned about the ideas of early Russian revolutionaries.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, Russian women were prominent in revolutionary activity. Vera Zasulich attempted to assassinate an especially cruel military governor in St. Petersburg; Sofia Perovskaia masterminded the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881. Some Jewish women, such as Gesia Gelfman, took part in this movement; the vast majority did not. Jewish women were for the most part religiously observant, still living in *shtetlekh* and speaking Yiddish.

Frumkin's revolutionary ideas were shaped above all by her experience in Jewish Minsk, where at least 20 percent of the population applied for charity to Jewish organizations, and where she recoiled at the sight of Jewish women standing in front of wealthy homes waiting for the traditional holiday handouts. Frumkin found a soulmate at her gymnasium, where a fellow student, Avrom Valt Lessin, influenced the development of Frumkin's ideas. Lessin argued that the orthodox Marxist theory of the early Bund leaders did not apply to Jews in the Russian empire, that it would be impossible to create a purely proletarian party, that the real distinction within the Jewish community was between rich and poor. Instead, he advocated organizing the poor majority of Jews for both socialist and nationalist goals.<sup>8</sup>

From an early age, Frumkin evidenced an interest in social activism. She taught a woman's circle in Minsk before age seventeen, and in St. Petersburg attended women's pedagogic courses, which were a hotbed of radical activity. While there Frumkin studied Marxist texts in addition to her college courses in philology, Russian literature, and education. Her interest in philology led her eventually to become fluent in six languages.<sup>9</sup>

Frumkin returned to Minsk in 1900, met and married a fellow Bundist, the engineer Boris Frumkin, and had her only child, a daughter, a year later. The following year Boris Frumkin, weakened by tuberculosis contracted in prison, died. In her widowhood Frumkin lived in a household consisting of her daughter, the daughter of her wet-nurse, and after the death of her sister Gitte, her two nieces. When Frumkin was in prison or exile her daughter lived with Frumkin's parents. Frumkin remarried during World War I, to a Rabbi Wichmann. This did not last long, but Frumkin continued to sign her personal correspondence with both her husbands' names.

By the time of the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the Duma elections of the next year, the 25-year-old Frumkin, using her pseudonym of Esther, a play on the Hebrew word *malke*, or queen, had become the only woman to be in a policy-making position in the Bund. Once the October Manifesto had given the green light for the creation of a legislative assembly and some civil freedoms, Frumkin wrote often for the socialist Yiddish papers, arguing that only a socialist revolution would bring about the fundamental social change necessary to improve society in general and that through this Jews would benefit. She was arrested twice, once in 1906 and again in 1907.

Frumkin's most vociferous criticism was directed at the Jewish establishment, people like her parents, the businessmen and professionals who had enthusiastically welcomed the proclamation of the Duma. These leaders, she argued, did not represent the majority of Jewish workers, were not democratically chosen, and would not defend their people in the Duma. She attacked traditional notions of the solidarity of all Jews, the *klal yisroel*. Instead she countered with a vision of Jewish solidarity with the working class that benefited all but the tiny number of rich elite. Seeking to appeal to the artisans who made up a large part of the Jewish poor, she emphasized Bund demands for an end to military service and for cultural autonomy and the recognition of Yiddish as the national language. The Bund also organized self-defense against pogroms; this may have been Frumkin's most persuasive argument. Still, the Bund, with 30,000 members, out of a Jewish population of over 5 million in the Russian empire, remained small. In comparison, the Zionists had ten times more members.

As a pedagogue and linguist, Frumkin from early on advocated the establishment of Yiddish schools as a means of teaching socialism to Jewish children and preserving Jewish identity. But Jewish education was available in only Hebrew. Here for Frumkin was a chance to provide an alternative. Secular education in Yiddish would preserve Jewish cultural traditions but align the Jewish masses with the working class as a whole. The use of Yiddish was symbolic in several ways—as class solidarity, for it was the language of the Jewish masses, and as an attempt to recognize *zhargon* (jargon), the women's language, as the “folk language,” the language of the people.

Frumkin first came to greater prominence in 1908 at the Yiddish language conference in Czernowitz at the time of her political exile from Russia. The conference was called by such well-known international Jewish literary figures as I. L. Peretz to recognize the emergence of Yiddish literature and Yiddish studies. Frumkin jumped into the debate with a proposal to change the definition of Yiddish as a language of the

Jewish people to the language of the Jewish people, but only in eastern Europe.

Frumkin is blamed for blocking a proposal by Peretz to form an international Yiddish literary and cultural organization that would have established Yiddish as the national language for all Jews; establish societies, libraries, model schools, and texts; and encourage the writing and publication of Yiddish works. She was so opposed to any attempt to proselytize for Yiddish in the larger world that she resigned in protest when the conference discussed establishing Yiddish schools and libraries on a worldwide scale. Frumkin feared that internationalizing Yiddish would dilute its significance as the language of the Jewish proletariat in eastern Europe and thus its utility as a vehicle for the Jewish revolution in that area. Although Frumkin helped defeat the Peretz proposal, she was not alone, and it is not clear that she was central to its failure: The Zionists, who advocated the revival of Hebrew as the Jewish spoken language, also opposed Peretz's plan.

From Czernowitz until the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Frumkin dropped from view, studying in Vienna, slipping into Russia, and falling into the hands of the Czarist police in the fall of 1912. Jailed for four months, and exiled to the north, to Archangel province, she did not stay there long. She managed to travel back to Minsk, then to Romania, and then to Astrakhan, where she was married for a brief time and worked in an orphanage.

Unlike many Bundists, Frumkin did not see a contradiction between raising the consciousness of the Jewish worker and observance of religious customs in the home. Her vision of the ideal Jewish proletarian home was not much different from a traditional vision, that is, the mother lighting the *shabes* candles, the father blessing the wine, the grandmother reading the *Tsene urene*. The difference was that this Jewish worker family would form the core of Jewish society, replacing the hierarchy of rabbis and Talmudic scholars. As Frumkin argued, “national education was only possible when the family was the nucleus of the nation.” And an emphasis on the family also enhanced the role of the woman in Jewish society.

Frumkin, like other Yiddishists, Zionists, and religious Jews, was confronting the same phenomenon, and that is the pressure toward assimilation. Frumkin saw the chief enemy in this regard to be the middle class and, particularly, the intelligentsia, which enthusiastically embraced assimilation, deserted their people, observed their day of rest on Sunday, and read Yiddish works—in Russian.

Although she was not hostile to religious customs, Frumkin herself argued for the secularization of these traditions, basing them on historical-cultural norms rather than religious ones. Thus, Jewish holidays would become national-proletarian celebrations, and religious



traditions, including prayer recitations, would be linked to the egalitarian ideals of Isaiah and other prophets.

It was during the period of her exile that Frumkin, in articles in Yiddish and Russian, developed her ideas about the *folkshule*, or secular folk school, as a force for educating the Jewish proletariat. In her 1910 brochure, Frumkin envisioned the Jewish folk school as teaching the arts and sciences, like the Montessori schools in Switzerland and Austria, and also educating children in Jewish literature and history, including the classics by Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, and others.

Frumkin staunchly defended the legitimacy of Yiddish, arguing vigorously against those who called it a bastardized language by comparing it to French (was it a bastardized form of Latin?). Further, Frumkin argued that the very same assimilated professionals who now could not find work in Russian cities would have to learn or relearn Yiddish to find work in the Pale of Settlement. This was indeed true before the Revolution, as czarist quotas had indeed limited the economic prospects for Jews outside the Pale.

The February Revolution of 1917 raised the hopes of liberals and social democrats who looked forward to an end to anti-Semitism in general and czarist discriminatory policies in particular. Frumkin became a "revolutionary defensist." She supported Russia's continued involvement in the war, joined the Bund central committee in April, and in May became the editor of the important Yiddish journal *Der veker* (The watchman).

Although the Bund tried to maintain its separateness, the events following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 forced members to make difficult choices. And it created a dilemma for the Bund and for Frumkin. The civil war following the Revolution was devastating to Jews in the Pale, as they were the main targets of the counter-revolutionaries and some Red Army units in White Russia and especially Ukraine; and the war itself devastated the economy. During the period 1918–21, the years of the civil war, 70 to 80 percent of the Jews had no regular income.

During the period 1917–20, Frumkin's attitude toward the Bolsheviks evolved from hostility to open support and alliance. Several factors influenced her. Of all the factions struggling for power during the civil war, the Bolsheviks were by far the least hostile to Jews; indeed, the leader of the Red Army was a Jew—Leon Trotsky. But the way in which the Bolsheviks took power, their hostility to other socialists, such as the Mensheviks and the Bund, and to the notion of Jewish cultural autonomy, indeed to free expression of any other point of view, trampled on social democratic values. Shortly after the October Revolution, in 1917, Frumkin attacked the newly imposed censorship, proclaiming that "the free word lives."

But events forced Frumkin to moderate her hostili-

ty and to join forces with those supporting the revolution. In 1918 Minsk was occupied by the Germans and the anti-Bolshevik and anti-Semitic White Russians. Following the German retreat, Frumkin joined with the Bolsheviks and Bundists in forming a military force and fighting for the revolution. She further accepted the education post offered her by the Bolshevik majority in the Revolutionary Council in Minsk. But at the eleventh Bund conference, in March 1919, Frumkin was still criticizing Bolshevik terror and censorship and arguing for the Bund's retaining its ties to international socialism.

By April 1920, at the Bund's twelfth congress, Frumkin spoke for the left wing in advocating that the Bund ally itself with the Soviet government. She no longer criticized Bolshevik terrorism and censorship, but she still advocated a separate and autonomous Jewish Communist organization within the Communist party. The Soviet government could protect Jews from persecution, argued Frumkin, but only Jews could define their own "national cultural" needs.

Frumkin was arguing from weakness; the Soviet government had no intention of keeping a separate Jewish Communist movement. As early as the fall of 1918 a Jewish Section (*Evsektiia*) had been created within the Bolshevik party. Prominent Jews within the party, such as Yakov Sverdlov, first president of the Soviet republic, opposed "separate forms for Jewish work," fearing the creation of a new Bund within the party; Lenin, the opponent of Bundist separatism, approved the creation of the Jewish sections.<sup>10</sup>

In 1921, the Bund formally disbanded. Esther Frumkin became the only woman member of the eleven-person Central Bureau of the Jewish Sections of the Communist party. For nine years she led efforts to bring "the revolution to the Jewish street." Frumkin and her comrades sought to achieve this goal by destroying the old Jewish communal and religious institutions, replacing religious observance with a secular Yiddish culture, and restructuring the economy to "proletarianize" the Jewish worker and eliminate the "unproductive" small traders and artisans who formed the bulk of the Jewish work force.<sup>11</sup>

Frumkin is especially known for her concerted attacks on observant Jews and especially the rabbis, as in her pamphlet *Down with the Rabbis*. Sometimes, she tempered the extremes of her comrades, as when she ordered a *beys medrish* in Vitebsk returned to its students. Other times, she expressed admiration for the tenacity of her Jewish opponents "wrapped in their prayer shawls."<sup>12</sup> Mostly, however, as a commissar Frumkin approved attacks on Jewish communal institutions, such as the *kehile*, and the closing of religious schools and seminaries and the labeling of rabbis, religious teachers, ritual slaughterers, and circumcisers as *lishentsy*, or déclassé, and therefore deprived of civil and economic rights. She



supported antireligious campaigns in which communist youth would hold noisy demonstrations outside synagogues on solemn holidays or break into synagogue services on Yom Kippur and eat demonstratively. She supported show trials such as the one held in Kiev in the same courtroom as Mendel Beilis's trial for ritual murder in 1911. The overall message was clear, and it dovetailed with Bolshevik campaigns against the Orthodox church, in which churches were burned, icons destroyed, and priests sent to labor camps.<sup>13</sup>

There was a particular ferocity to the Jewish Section antireligious campaigns. To justify them, Frumkin used the threat of renewed anti-Semitism, confiding to an American Jewish visitor: "You do not understand the danger Jews face. If the Russian people begin to feel that we are partial to the Jews, it will be harmful to Jews....Therefore, Jewish Communists must be even more ruthless with rabbis than non-Jewish Communists are with priests."<sup>14</sup>

This was part of her delicate balancing act, for as commissar, Frumkin tried to toe the Bolshevik line while continuing to fight for a proletarian Jewish cultural autonomy. She translated Lenin into Yiddish and with fellow Evseksiia Central Bureau member Moishe Litvakov wrote a book about Lenin in Yiddish, including a chapter on the Bund, Lenin's views about it and its "mistakes." She even tried to make Stalin a proponent of Jewish national autonomy. She renounced her former praise of the role of women as preservers of Jewish tradition in the home, castigating them as a "backward" element for continuing *peysekhs*, *shabes* observance, and traditional weddings long after they had renounced their faith.<sup>15</sup>

Frumkin's energy was not directed exclusively toward tearing down Jewish institutions. She was part of the Evseksiia effort to substitute "Red Judaism" for traditional Judaism. On *shabes* Jews were encouraged to form the challah in the shape of a hammer and sickle. At *peysekhs*, red *hagadas* appeared, in which the October Revolution replaced the deliverance from Pharaoh, as well as *hagadas* for "believers and atheists," in which *peysekhs* became the holiday of the enslaved masses and the traditional washing of the hands became the washing away of "bourgeois filth."<sup>16</sup>

Frumkin was instrumental in having Yiddish designated a national language and established a system of Yiddish schools in the Soviet Union. By the end of the 1920s, in Belarus and the Ukraine, half the Jewish children were attending these schools. But the schools were far different from Frumkin's and the Bund's initial dream. Teaching of Jewish history and of course, religion were banned; great Yiddish literature was used to hold up *shtetl* culture to ridicule. Higher education in Yiddish was not allowed; Russian was the language of the colleges and universities and of the

entrance examinations to get into them. In general, Yiddish was identified with the culture of the backward *shtetl*, not the bright industrial Soviet future. In 1926, over 70 percent of all Soviet Jews reported Yiddish as their primary language; by 1939 the number of Jews who claimed Yiddish as their first language fell by almost one half.<sup>17</sup>

As it became clear that the Jewish population was moving toward rapid assimilation, Frumkin put her energies into the creation of agricultural settlements in Birobidzhan and the Crimea. For a time, the Soviet government entertained the notion of creating a Jewish state in the Crimea. Neither this nor the much ballyhooed Jewish autonomous region in Birobidzhan, near the Chinese border far away from Jewish population centers, ever attracted many Jews, and the Crimean farming cooperatives had largely disbanded by World War II.<sup>18</sup>

Frumkin's last attempt to reconcile her vision of socialist Jewish nationhood came at the Sixth All-Union Conference of the Jewish Section in Moscow, in December 1926. With particularly tortured logic, she argued for the Soviet position on nationalities in opposition to bourgeois nationalism and for the possibilities of Jewish nationhood within the Soviet Union. Although the Jewish people were not a nation in the Leninist sense, having neither its own land nor its own economy, Frumkin claimed that the proletarian revolution had awakened the possibility of Jewish national consolidation and that "this new Jewish nation might take its place among the other peoples of the Soviet Union."<sup>19</sup> This was Frumkin's last political speech: No more All-Union Jewish Section conferences were held, and in 1930, the Evseksiia was disbanded.<sup>20</sup>

Esther Frumkin went from the Evseksiia to become head of the Jewish Department of the University of the National Minorities of the West and then rector of this educational institution established to train foreign student cadres. The university was closed in 1936 as the major purge trials began, and Frumkin moved to the Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow. In January 1938, she was arrested and put in prison. Tried in August 1940, she was sentenced to eight years of forced labor in one of the most notorious of Stalin's gulags, Karaganda, in Kazakhstan. Her daughter and son-in-law were also imprisoned.<sup>21</sup>

Frumkin, a diabetic, was able to get an indoor job as a bookkeeper, and her friends in the party finally won her release in 1943. But weakened by her ordeal and the lack of insulin treatment during her imprisonment, she died soon after, in June 1943.<sup>22</sup>

## CONCLUSION

How do we assess Esther Frumkin's life and work? Was she an avenging Medusa or was she a revolutionary heroine? It is easy in the post-Holocaust and post-Soviet period to see the naiveté, the flaws in her arguments.

Like most of her revolutionary comrades she completely underestimated the negative power of racism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism, as well the force of assimilation, of the move away from her beloved Yiddish as the opportunities for Russian study and schooling opened up. These forces eroded the number of Yiddish speakers in all parts of the former Pale of Settlement as well as the countries to which Yiddish speakers had emigrated, such as the United States and Canada.

Frumkin was no feminist, but in her early defense of women's role in preserving cultural traditions in the home, she helped honor women's critical contribution to Jewish continuity and to the building of the progressive Jewish family. She articulated the basic concepts of the *folkshule*, the secular progressive Jewish school; she argued the case for a proletarian Jewish culture; she was an excellent and caring teacher, remembered as such by many former pupils, including those who encountered her as a labor camp prisoner. As a journalist, as the only woman to be in a leadership position in the Bund and the Jewish Section, as a proponent of social change in a Jewish context, Esther Frumkin deserves a more thorough assessment of her activity.

<sup>1</sup>Martin Gilbert, *Atlas of Russian History*, Dorset Press, 1984, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>Naomi Shepherd, *A Price Below Rubies: Jewish Women as Rebels and Radicals*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1993, pp. 151–52.

<sup>3</sup>Jonathan Frankel, "Introduction," in Arcadius Kahan, *Essays in Jewish Social and Economic History*, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. xviii.

<sup>4</sup>Gilbert, *Atlas*, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup>Between 1861 and 1917 the overall population of the Russian empire increased from 73 million to 170 million. See Frankel, pp. xvii–xviii, and Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1969, p. 478.

<sup>6</sup>The first anti-Jewish pogrom in the Russian empire occurred in Odessa, in 1871. The Russian word *pogrom* comes from the Russian root *grom*, meaning thunder, destruction, ruin.

<sup>7</sup>Naomi Shepherd's *A Price Below Rubies* is by far the most comprehensive treatment of Frumkin's life in English. Most of the information presented here about Frumkin's life comes from Shepherd. There is no full biography of her in any language. Before Shepherd, the major source for information about Frumkin was an entry in Zalmen Reizen, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur* (Lexicon of Yiddish Literature), published in Yiddish in Vilna in 1926–29. Reizen's entry does not cover all of Frumkin's career. See Shepherd, p. 311, n. 3, and pp. 137–71 for a discussion of women in the Bund and a biography of Frumkin. For information about the Evseksiia (Jewish Section) and Frumkin's activities in it, see Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917–1930*, Princeton University Press, 1972, pp. 123–24, 233–71.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 152–53.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>10</sup>Gitelman, pp. 123–24. Yakov Sverdlov (1885–1919), an early Bolshevik and confidante of Lenin, served in a number

of administrative posts within the Bolshevik Party, and was Chair of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, the equivalent of the president of the Soviet republic.

<sup>11</sup>Shepherd, p. 166; Gitelman, pp. 233–371. On Frumkin and the Central Bureau, see p. 278.

<sup>12</sup>Levin, vol. 1, p. 72.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 168–69; Levin, p. 84.

<sup>14</sup>Nora Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union Since 1917*, vol. 1, Tauris, London and New York, 1990, pp. 72–73.

<sup>15</sup>Gitelman, p. 279; Shepherd, pp. 167–68.

<sup>16</sup>Levin, p. 84. Books published in Yiddish included *October Children* (Moscow, 1927), Leib Kvitko's *Little Book for Pioneers: You Can Be Dismissed for This* (Kharkov, 1928), anthologies of folktales and children's socialist songs, *The Haggadah for Believers and Heretics* (Moscow, 1927), and the *Komsomol Haggadah* (Kharkov, 1930). See Susan Tumarkin Goodman, ed., *Russian Jewish Artists in a Century of Change, 1890–1990*. Prestel, New York and Munich, pp. 256–57.

<sup>17</sup>Biographical information provided from here to the end of this essay is from Shepherd, pp. 169–71.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 169–70.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>21</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 171.

## Rozka Luksamberg Aleksandrowicz

### YAF AND WOMEN IN THE BUND

Thank you very much. I am really honored and pleased to be here. The topic is so close to my heart because, from my youngest years, I have admired the women in the Bund all my life. I want to thank the previous speaker for giving a little background about life under the czar.

In two years, in 1997, the Bund will celebrate a centennial, a hundred years. It's a big date; a hundred years have brought us a lot of innovations in technology and science. But one thing has stayed the same—unmet human needs. And there—the Bund starts.

As the previous speaker said, most of the active people were university students, intellectuals who belonged to the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party. But in the RSDWP, the Jewish activists realized that the general party did not address the unique problems of the Jewish people. As you heard before, poverty at that time was universal in Russia, but especially among Jews. The Jewish people didn't have any access to big business or factories. Mostly they lived in small *shtetlekh* and ghettos, and employers were usually relatives or neighbors, like Uncle Moses.<sup>1</sup>

So their working conditions were dependent on the generosity of the employers. The only good thing was that working hours started at sunrise and ended at sunset. The only blessing was the *shabes*—because they were all religious, and on *shabes* they couldn't work. I knew a painter at that time and he never painted on the Sabbath. He said the Sabbath saved the

Jews. If it weren't for the Sabbath, they could not have survived because they worked so many hours.

So, this is where the Bund comes in. The Bundists had a long fight with Lenin, because they felt that the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party did not meet the needs of the Jews or the Jewish workers. But I'm not going to tell you about that because the history of the Bund is recorded in five volumes in Yiddish; and now there's a new French volume of 800 pages.<sup>2</sup> On August 9-10, 1897, thirteen people, among them two women from Warsaw, met in Vilna in a small rooftop apartment and founded the Bund. Don't think it was an elegant apartment; it was a *boydem shtibl* (an attic). And they decided that there really was a place for the Bund among the Jewish workers, because only Bundists could defend and understand Jewish workers' needs.

One of the first leaders in building the Bund organization was Arkady Kremer. His wife was Patti Kremer, a little woman with tremendous energy and vitality. She was charming and joyful. Everybody liked her. She came from a very rich family, but she learned about poverty and illiteracy very early. She wanted to help, and she joined the Bund. She worked in the Bund all her years, until the Vilna Ghetto and the Gestapo took her.

Patti Kremer was a dentist. Her office was a camouflage for people who came from different cities and even countries to bring literature or ideas to help the Bund in Poland. They would come to her office with bandaged faces and the police wouldn't recognize them.

During the German occupation, Patti Kremer, at 79, organized a group of people at 4 o'clock in the morning to save Yiddish books from the Strashun Library. Later, at the time when the Gestapo came to take the remnants of the Jewish people in the Vilna Ghetto, Patti talked to the people and she said, "Come closer to me. Let's embrace and sing *Di shvue* (The oath), the Bundist hymn; it will be easier to face death." That was little Patti Kremer.

I want to apologize to the gallery of my women, every one of whom deserves a special session. For example, Esther Frumkin, who, by the way, was also a Bundist, though she left the Bund to go to the Communists. We were told in recent years that Esther confessed to her prison mate: "I'm sorry I left the Bund. I really belonged there all my life." Since I have a whole gallery of women, I cannot talk more about her.

The second beloved hero in my Bund life was Anna Rosenthal. Anna Rosenthal also came from a very rich family. Her parents were very interested in educating the children, and they hired tutors in foreign languages. Anna very quickly learned several languages. She was especially educated in Russian classics—in Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy. She was fortunate that one of the tutors who came to her home was Vladimir Kosovsky, the theoretician of the Bund. From

Kosovsky Anna learned about the principles of the future Bund. She quickly came to Vilna, joined the party, and was active in it all her life. At 19 she was arrested. At 21 she was in Siberia together with her husband, a physician. In Siberia, in exile, the conditions were so terrible that the inmates there, the exiles, organized a revolt. Pavel and Anna Rosenthal were in that revolt. They lost and were arrested, and the verdict was to apply to all the people who took part in the revolt. During the trial, they wanted to separate the women and give them a lesser verdict. Anna Rosenthal stood up and delivered the most courageous speech, telling the court that both women and men had risked their lives together for the ideals that they believed in, and that "we don't want a lesser verdict. We want to share the same fate as our men." As a result, they were all convicted to twelve years in exile. But that was in 1902; after the 1905 revolution, the prisoners were released.

Anna Rosenthal came back to Vilna, and she worked again in the Bund, in many capacities. She and her husband traveled to Switzerland, London, and Paris. When he was sent to the front as a physician during World War I, she went with him and shared all the hardships. Toward the end of her life, when the Soviets came to Vilna in 1941, she was arrested again, and she died in the same prison in which she had been held in her youth.

There is a lot more to tell about Anna Rosenthal. She and her husband were not only interested in politics but also in culture. They organized libraries. They both learned about the new techniques used in American libraries and wrote a book about them, introducing methods to bring Yiddish libraries up to date. I'm really sorry I can't tell more about it because of time.

But there is another person that I'm very fond of in the history of the Bund. It's Sarah Schweber. She was a vivacious, beautiful woman born to rich parents, but she was orphaned very early. She was a very strong-willed young person and she didn't want to be dependent on her aunt. She learned dressmaking and opened a shop in a town where there were a lot of military men. Soldiers in the high military came to be dressed by Sarah Schweber. She organized her business so that her employees did not receive salaries from her. Instead, they all shared the income that she made. That was a time when people were very exploited. She was also arrested many times and eventually it was arranged for her to leave the country and go to Switzerland.

Sarah Schweber was a self-taught person, but she educated herself so highly that she became an educator. She was a wonderful organizer and a wonderful writer. By the time that the Second World War broke out, she was the head of the trade union organization of the entire country of Poland, not only the Jewish unions, but also the Polish ones.

One thing I want to tell that's characteristic of

Sarah Schweber: When she came to New York, she didn't want any institution to support her. She went to the garment district and got a job as a dressmaker and worked for many years. She died at 90 in the Bronx. I remember her with a lot of tenderness.

The Bund functioned during three epochs. There was the period under the czarist regime and then the revolutionary period. But the Bund also functioned in Poland between the two world wars, and this was the most constructive period of Jewish life. There were Jewish writers, Jewish poets, Jewish theaters; everything was blooming.

The Bund at that period not only taught people how to organize strikes, but they taught them a lot of culture. They organized schools, famous teachers' schools in Poland, where the standards were so beautiful that representatives from other countries came to study and learn what they were doing. We had the Medem Sanitarium for children who needed health care. This was a famous institution. We had theaters and a newspaper and a youth magazine.

We also had circles for young people. It was very interesting. Young college people today know that you have to help teach those who are underprivileged because they don't have the required grades to enter schools. In the early days, we had a system in which whoever knew more taught the ones who knew less. On Saturdays there were between twenty and thirty circles where young people were taught. They were taught ethics and aesthetics, and culture and nature. They were taken on nature outings. They were taken to mountains and summer camps. And Sara Schweber worked not only during the revolutionary period but also during the time when we had cultural programs.

You should remember that most of these children were from poor families. And, of course, poverty wasn't erased during that time. It's still with us. But the poverty that we had in Poland cannot be compared to that of the present, because we did not have the social services that we have in the United States—services which are now in danger.

We also had a woman by the name of Esther Alter, the sister of Victor Alter. She came from a very elegant family. When her father died, they were so rich that they decided not to use a hearse, but to carry him to the cemetery. And the Russian occupiers sent an orchestra, because he was so prominent and so well known. The military orchestra played the funeral march.

I have many younger people that I just want to mention. We had a pediatrician named Broider. We had Luba Belitska, the head of the nursing school in Warsaw. We had people so devoted to the Bund. And then we had one period I cannot really do justice to, because I would say "*In Treblinka bin ikh nisht geven*": I was not there. But there were people, young people, who risked their lives, gave their lives. I just want to

describe two of them. One of them, when she was caught by a group of Germans, had a hand grenade. She killed them and killed herself. There was another young woman who received the highest military awards because she stopped the Germans so her group of friends could escape, and she paid with her life.

I'm very sorry I cannot finish all the others, but I would like to pay tribute to them someday, and I hope I have another chance with you to do so.

<sup>1</sup>A character in the Yiddish film of that name (see the description in "Good Girls, Bad Girls: Crossdressing and Misogyny in Yiddish Film," by Eve Sicular, below, in these Proceedings.

<sup>2</sup>Sholem S. Hertz, *Di geschichte fun Bund* (The history of the Bund), New York, 1960; and Henri Minczeles, *Histoire générale du Bund: un mouvement révolutionnaire juif*, Éditions Austral, Paris, 1995.

## Dina Abramowicz

### FORSHERIN: WOMEN SCHOLARS AT YIVO

Thank you very much for listening to this talk which, because of my health, will be informal rather than prepared. I could not really work on it as seriously as I wanted to.

I want to talk about YIVO (*Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut*), the Institute for Jewish Research (New York City), which could be considered one of the highest achievements in the development of the Yiddishist movement in Vilna. I think YIVO is one of the most remarkable achievements of Jews, of Jewish Vilna in general, and I would even say, of East European Jewry. It was dedicated to tradition and also to modernity. That is what YIVO was about. YIVO wanted to introduce organized scholarship to Yiddish life. It was an attempt to create an academic institution for Eastern European Jewry, who did not have opportunities to study Jewish subjects in Polish universities. In Polish universities Jewish subjects almost did not exist. So, a Jewish academy was very much called for, especially since Jewish cultural activities had developed so much. Of course at the head of YIVO, we should mention Max Weinreich, who was one of its founders and moving spirits.

The main organ of YIVO was *YIVO bleter* (YIVO pages), a scholarly periodical which began publishing in the early 1930s. There were not too many women who contributed to this periodical in the Vilna period, which lasted until 1939. One was—maybe you know this name—Rachel Wischnitzer, who studied art and architecture. In a YIVO publication she published an article about paper cuts which she found in the Jewish Museum in Berlin and which reflected Jewish customs connected with childbirth. They were called *shir ha-malos* (song of ascent)<sup>1</sup> and served as amulets intended to protect the woman in childbirth from evil spirits. Rachel Wischnitzer published this article about

customs connected with a woman in childbirth and it was very interesting. In fact, it was groundbreaking. It was not only a reflection of Jewish custom but Jewish artistic activities.

I want to speak a little bit about Dr. Weinreich's efforts to prepare young scholars. He organized the *aspirantur*, the training division of the YIVO to prepare young scholars. Dr. Weinreich got his philosophy and ideas from modern sociology; he wanted to study Jewish life in the present, as it was evolving before our eyes. He said that Judaic studies in the past have been mostly concerned with philosophical and historical developments, and he wanted to bring it closer to life. And that was the idea on which the training division was based.

In this training division there were several women, and I want to mention their names. Dr. Weinreich insisted that they should choose the subject of their study and that they investigate it in primary source material. He did not want them to collect material from books, but from life. One of them was Reyzl Walt. She studied the beginnings of the Yiddish school movement, which had its roots in the organization called Mefitzey Haskala (Society for the Promotion of Culture Among the Jews of Russia). Mefitzey Haskala was organized in St. Petersburg and controlled a network of schools for Jewish children. In 1913 it held a conference and decided that the Mefitzey Haskala should organize schools for all Jewish children with Yiddish as the language of instruction. But things changed gradually, and Reyzl Walt wrote a paper about the pre-Yiddishist school movement and about Mefitzey Haskala and its dissolution.

In the very important years between 1915 and 1917, two different groups around Jewish education emerged: the Zionists and the Yiddishists. It turned out that they could not work together, could not create a unified system of schools—and that is why Mefitzey Haskala fell apart. The Yiddishists went their way, the Hebraists went their way, with the result that two separate school networks, the Yiddishist and the Hebraist, were established. This was the subject of Reyzl Walt's research, which she based on the society's minutes and on newspaper articles. As a result, she really created a completely new area of research centered on Jewish education at the start of the Yiddishist movement.

It is interesting that many of the women in the training division were concerned with Jewish education. This is not an accident because, in the beginning, Jewish intellectual women were most active in the field of education. They were still teachers while they were developing as scholars. So the second woman I want to mention here is Hannah Pischatser-Mann. She chose a very interesting subject: the parents' motives in sending their children to Jewish schools. In Hannah Pischatser-Mann's time, there were basically three types of Jewish

schools: the Yiddish school, the Hebraist school, and the religious school which was more traditional, of course, like the *kheder*. Hannah Pischatser-Mann wanted to find out what motivated the parents to send their children to a Yiddish school or a Hebrew school.

It turned out that there was not too much consistency. A consistent attitude toward choosing a school rested more with the intelligentsia, the upper layer of society, which knew very well what it wanted. But the poorer layer of society—and there were many, many poor people in Vilna—sometimes chose schools simply for economic reasons. The Polish language schools, called *shabasuykes*,<sup>2</sup> were supported by the government, and actually offered free tuition, free textbooks, free lunches, and so on. So the poorer people's motivation was influenced by economics. But there was still another interesting observation noted in Vilna during that period. There were many parents who wanted, who insisted, that their sons get a traditional Jewish education. So the boys were sent to the religious schools, while the girls were sent to the Yiddishist and Hebraist schools.

And finally—I know that time is short—I want to make a few remarks about a third woman, Chava Slutski Kestin, who also chose a very interesting subject connected to Jewish schools, and that was the role of the school holidays in the life of children. And that was an extremely perceptive study, taking into consideration the psychology of the child. Chava Slutski Kestin found that, while the Yiddish school holidays and the school performances were very good for the children who participated actively, the school performances were somewhat painful experiences for those who were not called on to participate. She was, I think, one of the first women who was interested in children and who had insight into their inner development. Chava Slutski Kestin was from Warsaw; the other two teachers were from Vilna.

I appreciate the idea of being able to speak about women scholars at YIVO. I've only given a very superficial sketch of what was and what could have been if it had not been for the Holocaust.

I wanted also to tell you that in the present American period of YIVO we have quite a prominent representation of women and that a few of them are participating in today's conference; among them is Bina Silverman Weinreich, who is a folklorist. Chana Mlotek, who is not here today, deserves your attention. She is really a musicologist, and it is hard to find a Yiddish song that she does not know. Chana works in the YIVO archives, and I know how much she helps people with their musical research. Then there is Barbara Kirschenblat-Gimblet, who is very close to YIVO and who worked with Lucjan Dobroszycki on the book *Image Before My Eyes*. She is interested in



anthropology and is really close to our heart because her command of Yiddish is so excellent. She is really familiar with various aspects of Jewish life, including its culinary aspects, which is one of her many interests. And of course Deborah Dash Moore, who is the editor of the *YIVO Annual*. She is a very respected scholar of American Jewish history and, also, of eastern European history. And so I think women are more and more asserting their place in Jewish scholarship.

Thank you very much.

<sup>1</sup>Named for the introductory words of the psalm written on the paper cut.

<sup>2</sup>Derisive nickname for Jewish schools organized by the Polish government. These schools were identical to regular Polish schools, except that they were closed on the Sabbath. They were used to assimilate Jewish children.

## ***Feminism in the Classroom***

*Beverly Post, Chair*

**Ellie Kellman**

### **FEMINIST ISSUES IN TEACHING YIDDISH**

My topic for this panel is feminist issues in the language classroom. While some of my remarks would be applicable to all levels of Yiddish language instruction, today I will focus on working with adult beginners. I have divided my remarks into two sections: grammatical and lexical issues and teaching materials and curriculum. I would like to thank the students in the Uriel Weinreich Summer Program of 1995 and my colleague Dovid Braun for sharing their ideas on these issues with me.

**Grammatical and lexical issues.** I will speak first from my perspective as a teacher. Yiddish is a gendered language, and my job is to teach it. My experience with some beginning students who are native speakers of English is that some aspects of the gendered nature of Yiddish grammar are quite troubling to them. They experience a cultural dissonance when confronted with the genderedness of Yiddish and perceive that genderedness as an expression of male privilege.

I would like to begin by discussing some of the gendered features of Yiddish that are problematic. First, the system of forming agentives (words for people who perform specific actions) is gendered. In Yiddish, the base forms of agentives are masculine. The *-er* suffix yields terms such as *lerer* (teacher) and *beker* (baker). The *-ist* suffix produces *koyshbolist* (basketball player) and *sotsialist* (socialist). Yiddish indicates that a woman is an agent by adding a feminine ending to the masculine base form, yielding *lererin*, *bekerin*, *sotsialistke*, and *koyshbolistke*.

The feminine forms of agentives are complicated by usage and certain historical/cultural restrictions. For

instance, the terms *rebetsn*, *khaznte*, and *shoykhetke* traditionally denote the wives of the *rebe* (rabbi/teacher), *khazn* (cantor) and *shoykhet* (ritual slaughterer), not females who perform these roles. Problems arise when we need to speak about women professionals in the Jewish community in roles only recently made accessible to women, such as rabbi and cantor. The terms *rabinershe* for woman rabbi and *khaznte* for woman cantor are recent coinages that attempt to respond to women's assumption of these roles.

One of the first activities in my elementary Yiddish classes is getting people talking about themselves: their homes, jobs, family, lovers—in short, their identities. As teacher, my role is to supply the necessary vocabulary without inundating the students with new words. My experience is that beginning students want very much to be able to talk about themselves and their lives. So there we are in the middle of the lesson, and I'm supplying vocabulary to describe professions: *sotsial-arbeter* (social worker), *biblioteker* (librarian), *advokat* (lawyer), *khezhbn-firer* (accountant), *poet* (poet) and *sotsial-arbeterin*, *bibliotekerin*, *advokatke*, *khezhbn-firerke*, *poetese*. We're getting into some pretty long, tricky elocutions by the time we add the feminine agentive endings, not to mention the fact that there are myriad and confusing patterns of usage for the various feminine endings.<sup>1</sup> It's not surprising that to students who are native speakers of English, feminine agentive endings may seem clumsy, demeaning, or silly. For instance, the lawyers in my Arbeter-Ring elementary class one year thought *advokatke* was ridiculous.

A lot of the terminology we use in English to name the various aspects of postmodern life either do not exist in Yiddish or are new coinages. Students in my classes constantly ask questions of the type: "How do you say CD-ROM in Yiddish?" They are much more patient with the idea that I don't know of a Yiddish word for CD-ROM than they are with the answers I give for "How do you say woman rabbi or cantor?" I think this is because progressive people are highly sensitized to expressions of sexism in the English language. In English the use of feminine forms for agentives has come to be considered demeaning to women. In the last twenty-odd years, various sectors of society have adopted gender-neutral terms for agentives: flight attendant, haircutter/hairdresser, chairperson, food server.

Native speakers of English who begin to study Yiddish often find the feminine agentives jarring or even offensive in contrast to the terms they are used to from English. It is part of my role as a teacher to explain that Yiddish is a gendered language, and what that concept means. Not only agentives but every noun is assigned a gender which pervades its usage. For example, the word for table, *tish*, which is a masculine noun, is assigned the definite article *der* and the pro-



noun *er*. When forming sentences with *tish*, it is necessary to use the gendered article and pronoun: *der tish iz groys* (the table is large) and *er iz groys* (it is large). The system can get confusing when a masculine noun is used to refer to a female person. For example, the word *gast* (guest) is masculine, whether it refers to a male or female, as in the following utterance: *Der gast kumt fun yisroel. Zi iz a barimte poetese* (The guest comes from Israel. She is a famous poet).

Second on the list of problematic features is the use of masculine forms as base forms. For instance, when speaking of people in a group of males and females, the masculine form is used: *Ikht darf redn mit yedn eynem fun di mentshn* (I need to speak with each one of these people).

Furthermore, most nouns that could apply to either males or females are masculine, whereas in English they are not gendered at all: *der gast* (guest), *der khoyle* (sick person), *der tsuherer* (listener), *der ile* (child prodigy), *der mitglied* (member of an organization), *der pasazhir* (passenger).

I have had students in my classes who are resistant to using the third-person singular pronoun *men*, which means "one," because they associate it with the English word "man," and are alienated by the notion that a "masculine" pronoun would serve to refer to people in general.

Third, the Yiddish lexicon reflects conservative cultural norms with respect to gender. For instance, if we are looking for a Yiddish equivalent for Jewish woman we can choose between *yidishke* (female Jew), *yidish kind* (Jewish child), *yidishe tokhter* (Jewish daughter), *bas-yisroel* (daughter of Israel), and *yidene* (married Jewish woman [usually pejorative]). Only in recent years has the neologism *yidishe froy* (Jewish woman) for an adult woman, single or married, gained currency (outside Orthodox circles). That is the term I use in class and teach my students.

Frequently, other questions come up that test the limits of the Yiddish lexicon with respect to domestic relationships and sexual orientation. For instance, my students in the 1995 Weinreich Program learned the term *porfolk* (married couple) and wanted to know if the term could also be used to refer to domestic partners (of whatever gender). Also, there is an ongoing controversy among younger Yiddishists about whether the term *freylekh* (an English calque) should be used to refer to gay people.

As a teacher, I feel that my primary responsibility is to teach my students a living language. For me to tell them to go ahead and use *porfolk* to refer to unmarried domestic partners because there's no more precise term in use seems a disservice both to the Yiddish-speaking community and to the students themselves, who may overlook the fact that a native speaker of Yiddish would likely be confused by such a usage. Nevertheless, many feminist students are profoundly

alienated by the genderedness and male bias of the lexicon, and they would like to change those aspects of the language they consider sexist. My sense is that these students feel that in order for them to make Yiddish their own they need to have it reflect their cultural politics. The fascinating and heartening aspect of this phenomenon is that a significant percentage of today's students feel such a need to make Yiddish their own. It's a wonderful thing that they come with such strong feelings, and it's very important that we find ways to explore the questions they raise.

Teachers have a responsibility, however, to be sure that students understand that they are dealing with a living language and that real linguistic change is brought about by native speakers, not by students in a classroom. Therefore, unless they are planning to commit to making Yiddish their daily language, they will not be able to bring about the kind of change they would like (in the way millions of women have changed the vocabulary of American English by insisting on being referred to as Ms., not Mrs. or Miss).

**Teaching materials and curriculum.** I want to turn now to a discussion of feminist issues in materials development and curriculum planning. The standard elementary Yiddish textbook is Uriel Weinreich's *College Yiddish*. It includes readings which, in my opinion, contain a great deal of male bias. Several in the latter half of the book consist of biographies of outstanding Jewish figures—all male. In the shorter, simpler readings in the first half of the book, the protagonists are mainly male, and the few female figures that appear are trivialized. If one concludes, as I have, that much of this reading material is unacceptable, one can turn to a few other sources. I use stories from the series of readers published over the years by the Arbeter-Ring Schools, but these, too, contain very little material that reflects women's experience or even includes women as protagonists. Sheva Zucker's new elementary textbook, *Yiddish*, begins to address the problem by including female voices in many dialogues and reading texts. I believe that what is needed in the language classroom now is that we move beyond simply including female characters in reading passages to create a coherent curriculum that addresses itself to teaching culture and language. Such a curriculum would necessarily include readings that reflect the experiences of women as well as men and would allow class time for discussion of gender roles in the culture of Yiddish-speaking Jews.

One way we can begin to develop such a curriculum is by creating new readings for the elementary level. Last summer I developed a reading for my classes in the YIVO/Columbia Summer Program that incorporated a passage from *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*. I wrote a brief biography and introduction to the memoirs and excerpted a passage in which Glikl's

stepsister uses her knowledge of French and Hebrew to outwit several non-Jews who try to cheat her father in business (see Dorothy Bilik's article, above, in these Proceedings for the text of the passage). I chose this passage in order to generate discussion of women's roles in Glikl's cultural sphere. My sense is that the students were both excited to be reading an unabridged Yiddish text *and* motivated by the subject matter. This reading is designed to be used at the end of an elementary course, but it is certainly possible to create simpler materials to be used throughout the first year of Yiddish instruction. I'm planning in the next year or so to put together a high elementary-intermediate reader of memoirs by women. It would be wonderful if those of you here today who are classroom teachers would join in the project of creating new materials. It could take us a long way toward changing our students' accurate perception that the curriculum for the teaching of Yiddish is heavily gender biased.

<sup>1</sup>See Mordkhe Schaechter's textbook, *Yidish tsvey: A lernbikh far mitndike kursn* (Yiddish two: A textbook for intermediate courses), Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1986, pp. 53-54, 108-109, for detailed discussion of feminine endings.

## Anita Norich

### WOMEN IN THE YIDDISH LITERARY CANON AND CLASSROOM

It will come as no surprise to anyone interested in the title of these observations that the major problem faced by those who wish to teach women's texts in Yiddish is to find those texts. That has been a lament of Yiddish scholars for as long as any of us can remember. I am not at all sanguine about the existence of the ideal classroom in which such a course could be taught. How many of us are likely to find ourselves in a classroom in which our students read a *flisik* (flowing) Yiddish, have some grounding in the Yiddish literary tradition as it is commonly understood, and some training in feminist strategies of reading and interpretation? Were such a class to exist, we would still have trouble finding materials that tell a coherent story of women's Yiddish literary productivity. The problem, however, is not merely a dearth of women writers, as some would claim but, rather, a series of expectations and assumptions that we must approach in our critical writings and our classrooms: expectations about what constitutes the Yiddish literary canon and about the evaluative procedures we engage when we read; assumptions about what establishes value and pride of place in literature and about what we can teach and how. There are a series of narratives I would want to articulate in our mythic Yiddish women's classroom.

There are, to be sure, fewer women than men published in the hundreds of Yiddish journals and

newspapers of the past century, and the social and cultural conditions that made it infinitely more difficult for women to write and be published must be acknowledged. In teaching women's texts in Yiddish we begin with environments familiar to us from the study of other literatures, environments our students will readily understand. Women rarely had a room of their own in which to compose, rarely had the time away from family, or the financial security to write, and writing was generally considered an unseemly, somewhat risqué activity. What may be rather more obscure for our students — and, indeed, for us — are the peculiarly Jewish and Yiddish distinctions that must be added to this perspective.

Three sets of concerns are of particular interest in this regard. One has to do with the valence of storytelling in Jewish tradition and folklore and with the oral tradition. The second, related issue concerns the question of how to explain why there is so much more poetry than fiction among Yiddish women's texts. A third consideration has to do with what it means to ask these questions in and of Yiddish.

Consider the last question first. We insist on the place of women within a Yiddish literary canon, but I doubt very much if we have any agreement about what constitutes that canon in the first place. Most will agree to include Mendele Mokher Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz. That, surely, is too limited. Many will add David Bergelson, Der Nister, Shalom Asch, Bashevis Singer, Yankev Glatshteyn, H. Leyvick — any number of other male writers. But now we are on much more tenuous ground as the names of authors proliferate and the reading public diminishes. Do we then claim an equal position for Kadia Molodovsky, Anna Margolin, Esther Singer Kreitman, Chava Rosenfarb, Celia Dropkin, or any number of other women? As I have suggested elsewhere, I would urge us to ask what it means to seek an expansion of the canon when it is not at all clear what the canon has been and when the canon debates of ten years ago have now run their course in other literatures.<sup>1</sup> Instead of adding women's names to a list that may have little resonance in any case, can we engage in literary study as a noncanonical quest, one that asks questions about the interplay between varied texts and that examines various reading publics? We would then seek to describe reading strategies — the relationship, for example, between romantic fiction and particular reading communities — rather than establishing a hierarchy of "high" and "low" cultural forms or seeking to expand the mantle of respectability to women's texts. We would stop apologizing for the discontinuous or the naturalistic or *shund* elements in women's prose and, instead, explore their conditions of production and reception.

In other words, it seems problematic merely to

argue for a place for women within a Yiddish literary tradition, first, because we know too little about that tradition itself and, not least of all, because tradition signals a turn to a patriarchal hierarchy from which we seek to distance ourselves. At the same time, it does us a disservice to claim women writers in Yiddish as somehow *sui generis*, so different from their male peers as to trace a parallel but quite distinct literary progression. That, in fact, is what Yiddish writers were always claiming; from *di yunge* to *yung Vilne* to *di khaliastre* (the gang) to the *inzikhistsn*, all asserted their independence from outmoded literary conventions and a constrained past. Our challenge in turning to women writers is to navigate a path that does not leave us suspended somewhere in the midst of both these dominant narratives but, rather, lets us discover new texts and interpretive strategies for illuminating them, exposing us to women's own voices and to the ways they have crafted those voices into Yiddish texts.

For the most part — although certainly not exclusively — we will find that women have written Yiddish poetry. The same may be said of Hebrew, too, but not of American or English or French or other European literatures. In English, for example, we often refer to the novel as a domestic genre, as having the potential to be self-referential, romantic, many of the things we associate with women's texts. But in Yiddish, fewer women have written novels.

What is it that encourages women to write poetry in Jewish languages and what keeps them — until more recently — from producing novels? There are several ways to answer these questions in our classrooms. A common view returns us to the social and economic conditions alluded to above. These conditions certainly kept women from having the wherewithal to produce long fiction. But we should be careful about suggesting — as such views seem to suggest — that poetry takes less time or is more fragmented or can be composed under less ideal conditions than prose. A different explanation suggests that Jewish women did not write novels because the expansive and cohesive social worldview implicit in that genre was not open to them in the same way as to Jewish men.

Storytelling suggests, in ways poetry does not necessitate, a grounding in some social structure that is being described and into which one fits. It implies a rootedness in culture that has been quite different for men and women. Yiddish-speaking women of eastern Europe and immigrant America were certainly wage earners, certainly living within a defined social structure, but that social structure was also one that left them on the periphery of any number of crucial activities valued by that culture. Ritual life, the status conferred by learning, the centrality of the synagogue — to name only a few — were simply not open to them in the same ways.

There are other reasons for the preponderance of poets that we have yet to explore more fully. The history of modern Yiddish literature is relatively new, and it rises and falls in less than a century. In twentieth-century America its strength lay in poetic expression, its innovations taking their most exciting forms in verse and not in prose. (The situation is different in eastern Europe, but that is still another topic.) Women entered the Yiddish literary world, then, at a time when its poetry flourished under the sway of modernist literary movements.

In addition — and perhaps most provocatively from my perspective — we need to know a great deal more than we do about the valence of different genres within Jewish letters. There is a long tradition of storytelling among Jews in Hebrew and Yiddish, and that tradition is associated with *aggadah* and *midrash*, with stories from which women were, for the most part, excluded. That is to say, if storytelling is grounded in some form of *aggadic* and *midrashic* religious learning, does that make Jewish storytelling a particular form of religious activity? Does that make prose and stories appear more characteristically as a masculine genre — a genre men create and analyze — than is true in other cultures? I suspect the answer to both questions may be a qualified yes and that our Western understanding of genres may need to be adjusted for the Jewish case before us.

Another widely accepted notion that needs to be challenged has to do with the oral tradition. Anyone familiar with African-American women's narratives or with those of Southern women in America will recall that women are generally considered to be the bearers of an oral storytelling tradition. They are commonly believed to have had little access to books or to writing, but are purported to have created oral texts and passed them on from generation to generation. Here, too, the Jewish context before us resists any such view of the oral tradition as peculiarly female. Surely the "oral tradition" means something quite different for Jews, invoking as it does the study of the Oral Law (the Talmud and all other exegesis on the Torah, or Written Law) and thus connected, most emphatically, to a male realm. What we can talk about in Yiddish culture are the different domains of male and female storytelling, the stories of women in the kitchen and men in the *besmedresh* (study house). At a later date, perhaps, they may come together in the workshop.

A final challenge to any essentialist notion of what constitutes women's writing and women's voices has to do with the search for a woman's language. French literary theorists have taught us how to argue about the need for or the existence of such a language. Some of us have found ourselves in discussions about what it means to write or read like a woman, to form sentences that are feminine, to identify a writer's language as masculine or feminine.

The problem is complicated in Yiddish because many of us have made much of the fact that Yiddish is *mame-loshn*, the mother tongue that invokes a matrilineal, matronymic culture, certainly as distinct from Hebrew's status as the tongue of the father, but also distinct from English, French, Spanish, or other languages of the nation. We need to reclaim the concept of *mame-loshn* in some new way. We must remember that the feminization of Yiddish culture has not traditionally stood us in good stead.

By "the feminization of Yiddish culture" I mean the extent to which *mame-loshn* has been cast as domestic, the language of home, the language of "otherness" that needs to be transcended in order for independent modern lives to emerge; the ways, too, in which *zhargon* has ceased being a simple noun, another word for Yiddish and has come, instead, to mean jargon, something less than language. Yiddish has become domesticated more recently in another way, a way that will be more familiar to our students, many of whom come to it as a sign of mourning and memory, an authentic connection to a destroyed culture rather than as a living sign of complicated, extraordinarily energetic creativity.

Yiddish is not some legendary women's language, and we can no more distinguish a women's style in its poetry and prose than we can in any other language. We need only keep in mind one more interesting fact about Yiddish literature to illustrate the limitations of any such claims. In many European literatures, women writers assumed male pseudonyms in order to be at once published and hidden. Early reviews of George Eliot or Georges Sand are only some of the examples of the absurd critiques the belief in such masks yielded. The "masculine" nature of these women's prose was often heralded. In Yiddish the situation was exactly reversed, with male writers sometimes assuming female pseudonyms in order to publish new, modernist poetry. Yankev Glatshteyn published as Clara Bloom and Moyshe Leyb Halpern published under his sister Frieda's name, both poets having earlier been rejected under their own names. And these poems, too, were regarded as authentically feminine and discussed in such terms. This is not, we may conclude, a particularly useful enterprise.

I have referred to some of the pedagogic and theoretical narratives and complications presented by the case of Yiddish women writers, but not to individual writers themselves. To some extent, these are only gradually becoming familiar to us, thanks to the research of a number of Yiddish scholars. In Yiddish, there are several sources to which we can send our students. The most familiar one is Ezra Korman's *Yidishe dikhterins antologye* (Anthology of Yiddish women poets), published in 1928, and still the most reliable,

extensive compilation of women's texts in Yiddish.<sup>2</sup>

In 1928, Korman collected the poetry of seventy women. I wonder how many of us could do that now or could produce an anthology of seventy women since 1928. Other, more general anthologies leave us disappointed. Certainly, we have no reason to be impressed by the inclusion of only eight women in Bassin's prodigious *Antologye: finf hundert yor yidishe poezye* (Anthology: Five hundred years of Yiddish poetry) in 1917. Other anthologies, in Yiddish as in English, have similar problems. Bassin's 1940 collection, *Amerikaner yidisher poezye* (American Yiddish poetry), included only one woman — Anna Margolin. We cannot rely on anthologies or on the literary encyclopedias in Yiddish for adequate information. Consider Zalman Reizen's *Leksikon* and its inclusion of only about twenty women.

One excellent way to gather information is to assign it to our students. We all lament the absence of adequate bibliographic tools for the study of Yiddish literature, the absence in most cases even of tables of contents or indexes for journals. We would help address this problem and also expose our students to an extraordinary wealth of materials if we asked them to page through a year's worth or six months' worth of any journal, looking both for women authors and the contexts in which we find them. They will understand the excitement of discovery — of finding a poem or story by Malka Lee or Fradel Shtok or Yente Serdatsky or countless other, less familiar names. They will contribute to a changing sense of Yiddish literary traditions. And, not incidentally, they will see an environment unfolding.

It is, at last, time for us to be much clearer about the ways in which Yiddish literary study is not like the study of other literatures. We have long insisted on its commensurability with more familiar literatures, with the ways in which it develops like other cultures. Much impressive work has been done comparing Yiddish literature to these others. But both generally and in the case of the study of women writers, I believe we have now reached a time when we may emphasize what specific influences set Yiddish apart from these cultures too — what is specifically Yiddish as well as what is more broadly literary.

Those of us who research or teach Yiddish literature have more trouble obtaining materials; we have a different sense of what genres mean; we have a literature whose canon may never be established but which is undoubtedly reaching closure; we have the extraordinarily nurturing effect of Jewish culture for the writers we consider; we have balances to strike between traditional religious culture and modern secular culture. And we have a rich, varied range of texts to introduce to our students — texts by men and women — texts to interpret and illuminate and, first of all, to discover.



**Editors' note:** For the names of some Yiddish women writers and the titles of their works, consult the following: *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* (Lexicon of new Yiddish literature), which contains nearly three hundred entries for women; Norma Fain Pratt's ground-breaking article "Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers 1890-1940," pp. 353-67 and 375-79; "Authors' Biographies" and "Bibliography of Authors' Works" in Frieda Forman et al., eds., *Found Treasures*; and "Yiddish Women Writers: Titles Available," a twenty-page catalog distributed without charge by the National Yiddish Book Center. For complete information about these publications as well as the NYBC, see "Bibliography and Resources" in the Appendix to these Proceedings.

<sup>1</sup>For a fuller exploration of the issues raised here see my article, "Jewish Literatures and Feminist Criticism," in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, eds. Naomi B. Sokoloff, Anne Lapidus Lerner, and Anita Norich, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, 1992, pp. 1-15.

<sup>2</sup>See Kathryn Hellerstein, "A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish," in *Handbook of Jewish-American Literature: An Analytical Guide to Themes and Sources*, ed. Lewis Fried, Greenwood, New York, 1988, pp. 195-237. See also Hellerstein's annotated bibliography "Gender Studies and Yiddish Literature" in *Gender and Text*.

### Evelyn Torton Beck

#### FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON THE TEACHING OF YIDDISH LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

For me, the teaching of Yiddish literature in translation at the university is inextricably linked with feminist activism, though exactly how and why may not be self-evident. This intertwining is both an accident of my own intellectual history and one that provides an excellent example of my theory that oppressions and invisibilities are not separable, but are interconnected. It is my contention that if you pull on any one thread of the fabric that constitutes the social order—be it gender, socio-economic class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, (dis)ability, or age—if you follow that single thread long enough, you will eventually expose the interrelationship of all the threads and reveal the constructedness of the entire fabric. You can begin with an analysis of race, or gender, and come to understand how the other factors function. For me, it began with Yiddish.

In 1969 I received my Ph.D., having written on the influence of Yiddish theater on the literary imagination and symbolism of the Czech-born, German-speaking Franz Kafka. This research led me to refresh my childhood education at the Sholom Aleichem Folk Shule, where *khaverte* Novak taught me Yiddish. This reimmersion into the Yiddish language and literature, decades later, led me to wonder why this wonderfully rich and varied literature was not included among the dozens of languages and literatures of the Modern Language Association (MLA). When I asked my doc-

toral adviser about this omission, she did not try to justify it, but simply explained to me how I could do something about it. It seemed relatively easy: Send out a call for papers, write a petition, get people to sign it, call a meeting, and a Yiddish seminar at the MLA would come into being. Following these steps, I became the grandmother of Yiddish at the MLA, though my presence (and that of other women) did not yet ensure that women writers or feminist perspectives would be included.

When, as a faculty wife, mother, and graduate student, I was finishing my dissertation, in the late 1960s, I had not paid close attention to feminist activism, but as a junior faculty member I quickly grasped its meaning in my personal and professional life. The call for inclusion of women's writings in the curriculum only came alive for me after I had organized the first course in Yiddish literature in translation (first at the University of Maryland-College Park, later at Wisconsin-Madison), only to discover that the syllabus I had constructed consisted entirely of male writers. These were the only ones I knew, and the only ones whose works were available in English. But even a course focusing only on male writers can be taught from a feminist perspective (though the availability of *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* and materials in *Bridges* by now obviates such a choice). Questions of gender and sexuality are entirely appropriate in any classroom. And setting the context for a course in Yiddish in translation makes it necessary to introduce Yiddish as *mame-loshn*, meaning "mother tongue" or "mothers' tongue," and also referring to Yiddish as the language spoken by women in the home and in the marketplace. Then one needs to reflect on the origins of Yiddish in literature written for women and men uneducated in Hebrew. But precisely because it is *mame-loshn*, Yiddish carried with it a sentimentalized view of women and grossly negative associations.

While Hebrew was associated with the male principle, Yiddish was female. The following set of associations will demonstrate how differently the two languages were perceived and valued.

#### Hebrew/Yiddish:

- **Ancient roots, prayer and study/The vernacular, the daily**
- **The spiritual, the ineffable name of God/The mundane, the body and the flesh**
- **Complex interpretations/The unschooled**
- **The *shul*/The marketplace**
- **Jewish law/The irregular and uncontrolled over emotionality and exaggerations**

#### Other characteristics of Yiddish:

- Some believed that Yiddish simply flowed from the writer's pen, as women's writing was believed to

flow from them like menstrual blood, without conscious control.

- Yiddish was not "legitimized" as a language until the Czernowitz Conference of 1908.
- Yiddish is the only language to use the double negative, and it is not unusual to find in Yiddish a series of adjectives where other languages would make do with only one.

In short, while Hebrew was revered, Yiddish was treated as if the language itself were a woman, subject to the same negative evaluations and stereotyped associations that marked women. However, as Irena Klepfisz points out in the introduction to *Found Treasures*, in real life the division between the two languages was never as rigid as their reputations would suggest.

Because Yiddish was associated with women, and because it was spoken in the context of the hostile, anti-Semitic world of Eastern Europe in which Jewish men's masculinity was by definition suspect, Jewish men found it necessary to disavow Yiddish in order to construct for themselves a firmer male identity. This is based on Chodorow's assertion (in *The Reproduction of Mothering*) that in modern Western patriarchies, where women are denigrated and disempowered, boys learn to disassociate themselves from their mothers in order to become men. The paucity of translations of Yiddish women's writing (in comparison to the wealth that existed in Yiddish) may also be explained by such a process of disassociation. It also explains why Jewish men wrote pseudonymously when, in trying to reach the masses, they were forced to use Yiddish.

Reader response theory is especially helpful in giving us tools to think about how, as women, we can most

fruitfully read texts written by men. First, it is imperative to locate oneself with respect to the narrative point of view: to ask what the text demands of the reader, to what assumptions the reader is asked to acquiesce. Judy Fetterly (in *The Resisting Reader*) suggests that women read texts by men "against the grain," so that we do not simply absorb the narrator's value system, a perspective that would make I. B. Singer's texts, for example, more palatable to women, whom he consistently stereotypes when he does not denigrate them).

In addition to reading texts by men in ways that do not distort our own understandings of ourselves as Jewish women, it is imperative that we reclaim texts by women. This raises questions: Do Yiddish-speaking women write in what Carol Gilligan calls "a different voice" from the men of their group? Do women, in fact, bring a different set of assumptions to their writings? The much needed process of reclamation, though begun by pioneers like Irena Klepfisz and Frieda Forman, among many others, cannot happen unless it is collectively sustained. It needs not only those willing to undertake the arduous and often thankless job of translating Yiddish women's writings, it also needs strong institutional support: presses willing to publish these works, book stores willing to carry them, teachers ready to use the books as texts in the classroom. Not only must Women's studies learn to be inclusive of Jewish women, but courses in Jewish Women's studies must vigilantly be inclusive of the amazing diversity of Jewish women: not only Ashkenazi but Sephardic and Mizrahi women, not only heterosexuals, but also lesbians, bigendered, transgendered, and celibate Jewish women. The possibilities are endless, and we would do well to celebrate them all.



DINA ABRAMOWICZ  
Photo by Sharon Wigutloff



## Workshops

Frieda Forman and Ethel Raicus

**FOUND TREASURES: STORIES BY YIDDISH WOMEN WRITERS:  
A BILINGUAL EXPLORATION OF THEMES AND WRITERS<sup>1</sup>**

Ethel and I were two of the co-editors and translators of *Found Treasures*, the first anthology of Yiddish women writers in English. We explained that we were part of a Toronto group of Yiddishists and that our collection emerged out of our need as Jewish feminists to explore the lives and experiences of our foremothers in their own words rather than through the filter of male authors. We discussed and illustrated the virtual exclusion of women's works from Yiddish anthologies and translations. We described the process of researching and searching, of skimming and reading hundreds of texts to retrieve stories which most vividly depicted and detailed women's heretofore unexpressed reality.

Our intent was to give participants a *yidishn tam* of the stories, and we distributed original Yiddish texts for the stories we planned to discuss. Some women had learned Yiddish as children but had not read it for years; most had never read work in *mame-loshn* by women writers.

We chose three authors of the eighteen represented in *Found Treasures*: Sarah Hamer-Jacklyn, Yente Serdatzky, and Shira Gorshman. The two of us had translated these writers and felt a special bond with them; their work drew on certain themes that we wanted to explore; and, in Gorshman's case, we wanted to discuss a living writer's work. To give some sense of the writers' lives and times, we provided biographical information and historical background.

**Sarah Hamer-Jacklyn**, born in 1905 in Poland, emigrated to Canada at the age of nine. At sixteen, she began her career in the Yiddish theater as an actress and singer. She made her literary debut in 1934, with the story "*Shap-meydl*" (Shopgirl), which was serialized in *Der tog*. She was also published in *Tsukunft*, *Der forverts*, *Yidisher kemfer* (Yiddish fighters), and other periodicals. Jacklyn's writing was praised by the critics for its richly colored terrain, full-blooded characters, and fluent dialogue; she was attuned to the life around her, whether in the rootedness of the *shtetl* or in the raw and bewildering world of immigrants.

We read from "*Mayn mames kholem*" (My mother's dream), which depicts both traditional and oppositional attitudes toward women. The deprecation of the female is expressed in the shame and dejection felt by the narrator and her family because there is no son to say the *kadish* for their mother. The grandfather, an illustrious Torah scholar, stands alone against the community's traditional misogyny. In him, Jacklyn created a *shtetl* hero.

Temporality is central to this story: birth, death, changing traditions, all play a role. Memory is significant since, like a number of the stories in *Found Treasures*, it functions as a *yisker bikhl* (small memorial book), commemorating the lost Jewish communities of eastern Europe.

**Yente Serdatzky** was born in 1877 into a poor family, distinguished for their love of learning and literature. Their home was a hub for Yiddish poets in Kovno, Lithuania. The revolution of 1905 inspired her to become a writer and so, already a mother of two, she moved to Warsaw to pursue her career. There, she made her literary debut and found an encouraging figure in I. L. Peretz. Many of her stories center on the lives of intellectuals in the progressive movements of her era.

Her story "*Umgebitn*" (Unchanged) portrays both feminist and progressive politics. Like Miriam Raskin, another author in the collection who also wrote about life among radicals, Serdatzky cast a sharp eye on gender relations in the movement and found them far from egalitarian. She recognized that a gendered world existed even in the movements that preached a new world for women. "*Umgebitn*" also deals consciously with the act of writing and, unlike any other work in *Found Treasures*, directly addresses writers who use women's experiences as material for their literary adventures.

The last writer we discussed was **Shira Gorshman**. She, too, was born near Kovno, in 1906. Today, she lives and writes in Israel. Gorshman left home at fourteen and at sixteen gave birth to a daughter. In the 1930s she helped build Jewish agricultural collectives in the Crimea.

Gorshman's language is ironic yet tender, concise but visually rich and poetic. We both loved Gorshman's work. Since I had recently visited her in Israel, I was able to give an account of her continuing literary activity.

"*Zikh nisht oysgeredt di hertser*" (Unspoken hearts) is a story of conflict and forgiveness, of separation and reconciliation between mother and daughter. The scene in which they perform a dance of forgiveness is a classic. "Unspoken Hearts" is also a hymn to domesticity: lavishly described food preparation, caustic exchanges between husband and wife, concern and grief over children—all against a background of major political and social changes and the onset of the war.

It was hard to bring the workshop to an end. The reception given to these works demands its own telling and time. For the moment, we can say that these words brought us closer to our *yerushe* (inheritance) than we'd been in many years.

<sup>1</sup>Summary by Frieda Forman.

Clare Kinberg and Ellen Rifkin

**HEMSHEKH AND BRIDGES: SECULAR JEWISH FEMINISTS  
CREATING CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS**

Newspaper and book publishing houses; unions; burial, benevolent and free loan societies; *landsman-shaftn*; political parties; agricultural training farms and collectives; research institutes and schools for children and adults—these are just a few examples of institutions organized only a few generations ago by Yiddish-speaking secular Jews. Though most secular Jews no longer speak Yiddish, our need for cultural, social, and political institutions abides. And while we are inspired by and learn from the institutions organized in the past, we need to look at our contemporary circumstances, needs, resources, and environments, and build institutions of our own.

These are the assumptions Clare Kinberg and Ellen Rifkin brought to this workshop on secular Jewish feminists creating cultural institutions.

Though they are distinct institutions, both *Bridges* and Hemshekh<sup>1</sup> share this perspective on Yiddish as it relates to secularism: familiarity with Yiddish women's writing in the past means knowing that when we struggle in the present to create art or to participate in political movements, we are grounding ourselves in questions that Yiddish-speaking women who preceded us were deeply engaged with—class injustice, assimilation and Jewish identity, life in the Diaspora and connection to a homeland, and our relationship to religious tradition. When we try to forge a connection between our lives and theirs, we find that their art, activism, and sheer efforts to persist include but take us far beyond the borders of religious life.

Rifkin and the Hemshekh cofounders recognize that unless we foster awareness of our rich and diverse secular Jewish heritage, the lives of such women will be lost to us. The intertwining of political, artistic, and educational creativity in our secular heritage, and the extensive influence of women in braiding these strands together, can challenge us to expand and deepen the ways we express our Jewish identities today. Hemshekh seeks to develop projects and institutions that forge a dynamic relation to this heritage. Hemshekh's first project is the publication of *Mit fendl un feder*/With Pot and Pen: *Three Early Yiddish Women Writers*, edited by Frieda Forman and Ethel Raicus (scheduled for fall 1997). It will be the first volume ever to feature both original texts and translations of Yiddish stories by women. The works of Yente Serdatsky, Rokhl Brokhes, and Fradel Shtok portray the experience of women in relation to orthodox Judaism, poverty and community values, Jewish socialist politics, immigration and assimilation, and marriage, family, and sexuality. Hemshekh is also currently working on a collection of biographical pieces on significant contemporary and historical Jewish women, geared to

readers ages 12 to 16, with an eye to nurturing progressive Jewish values in the coming generation.

*Bridges*, published since 1990, is a semi-annual journal of culture and politics. *Bridges* publishes creative writing, artwork, essays, reports that put Jewish women's lives into historical, social, and political contexts. Writers and artists are asked to notice and value particular circumstances and contexts: class, families, sexual identities, language, nationality. The editors' assumption is that learning in depth about Jewish women's lives will lead to connection with other women, that the deeper we explore differences among Jews and the many different facets of each Jewish woman's life, the more we will understand other women's identities and the stronger will be our basis with which to form alliances.

Poetry and prose by women writers in Yiddish from earlier in this century—both in translation and in the original—have appeared consistently in the journal, providing a way for contemporary Jewish feminists to explore our connection to the creativity and activism of generations of Ashkenazi women. In "*Di mames, dos loshn*/The mothers, the language: Feminism, *Yidishkayt*, and the Politics of Memory" (*Bridges*, vol. 4, no., Nov. 1, 1994), Irena Klepfisz explains one of the central reasons *Bridges* puts a high priority on the recovery of Yiddish women's writing:

... we need to recognize that [*yidishkayt*] consisted of two primary components—culture and politics. In pre-Holocaust Europe and in the States, these were intertwined, in part, because political movements recognized the political nature of recording history, creating art. Like today's non-mainstream writing, Yiddish poetry and fiction were part of every political organ, and many literary journals were associated with political movements.

She goes on to say that because most of us cannot read Yiddish, we have lost a whole generation's

... literature, intellectual discourse, music, art, folk wisdom, and custom. This lack impacts greatly both on our sense of ourselves and on our ability to function politically. For example, we know Jews belong in multicultural organizations, but we have a hard time articulating why. If we can't explain it to ourselves, how can we expect non-Jews who oppose our inclusion to understand it?

In the century before the Holocaust, Yiddish-speaking Jews confronted, and wrote about, precisely these issues.

*Bridges'* unique commitment to Yiddish women's writing has highlighted one of the most subtle differences among Jewish feminists: There are those who relate to Jewishness primarily in a religious sense and those who understand Jewish identity primarily through history and politics. Hundreds of women were published in the Yiddish press over the past century, and

this writing was, by definition, largely secular and political. Though women did write prayers in Yiddish, until fairly recently women were not allowed to be religiously educated enough to write seriously about religious topics. In addition, most of the Yiddish publications that would publish women were sponsored by secular, political movements, and it is precisely this writing that Jewish feminists who look to history as their source are most interested in. Secular Jewish women are urgently concerned with learning about and from the social and political lives of these Jewish women writers and activists: their life choices, the nuances of political affiliation, their real-life experiences, and their insights on family, nation, ethics, and religion.

The workshop facilitators presented participants with two questions we hoped would lead into the heart of the problem:

1. In the course of our daily lives—in social interactions, in our intimate relationships, at our workplaces, and in our participation in politics and community activities—what kinds of needs do we experience, as Jewish feminist women, that are not addressed by existing institutions?
2. How can we create institutions that will address those needs?

Workshop participants identified several needs: knowledge about Jewish history and specifically Jewish women's history; community with shared feminist and secular values; organizations to take the place of secular and socialist organizations of their parents' generation; resources for study. Participants spoke of their desire to integrate information about Jewish women's history and values into diverse aspects of their lives. They envisioned developing formal and informal learning networks to this end. They also explored the need for nonreligious gatherings to mark beginnings, completions, milestones, questionings, in the cycles of personal and community life.

In the end, participants had to return to their homes in Florida, New York, Oregon, California, and elsewhere with new ideas and inspiration to work with others in their own communities to create the organizations and institutions they need in their lives.

<sup>1</sup>For detailed identification, see the Bibliography and Resources at the end of these Proceedings.

## Paula Teitelbaum

### YIDDISH SONGS FOR GIRLS

Jewish children's songs must be considered within the cultural context in which they were created. Differences in the life paths laid out for boys and girls in traditional Jewish communities created separate repertoires of lullabies, games, and songs for each sex. Folksongs appropriate for both sexes (unisex songs) exist, but are few.

The body of Yiddish songs for and about children include anonymous folksongs created in Eastern Europe and, later, songs written by known poets in Europe, the Americas, and other parts of the world to which Yiddish culture had spread.

The songs I selected for the workshop were a mix of traditional nursery rhymes; folksongs that reflect folk beliefs and traditional female roles; and "unisex" lullabies, which evoke beautiful sounds and images in order to quiet the child, whether boy or girl, so that s/he will fall asleep. I also included ballads and songs that feature girls as main characters or that reflect a girl's point of view. Some of these were written by modern Yiddish poets, such as Y. L. Peretz and M. Broderson, and are used in secular Yiddish schools around the world.

My criteria for choosing songs to sing to my own daughters include a positive answer to the question, Does the song fit their identities as Jewish girls growing up in America in the 1990s?

During the workshop, the participants listened to songs while following the lyrics, which were given in the original Yiddish, in transliteration, and in English translation. They sang along, shared different versions of the songs I presented, and discussed ways of adapting specific songs intended for boys to suit girls.

In addition to the songsheets, the participants received pitch pipes as well as a list of recordings in Yiddish for children and books about Yiddish songs. Most of the participants were involved in teaching children and were grateful for the materials they received, which they could use with their students.

The list of songs included the following: *Patshi, patshi, kikhelekh* (Clapping game); *Sorele's in vald avek* (Sorele went to the woods); *Hoyde, hoyde, hoydlke* (On the swing); *Helf ikh mamen* (I help mother); *Tsipele* (Tsipele); *Geven a mol a Sorele* (Once there was a Sorele); *A kleyn meydele klapt*

*in tir* (A little girl is knocking on the door); *Leyent ma a mayse* (Ma reads a story); *Shteyt in feld a beyemele* (A tree stands in a field); *Ayngevigt un ayngheshlofn* (Cradled to sleep); *Sheyn bin ikh sheyn* (I am pretty); and *Yome, Yome* (Yome, Yome). The texts of these songs are available from the Jewish Women's Resource Center of the NCJW New York Section.

**TSIPELE**

(M. Broderson)

**ציפעלע****מ. בראדערזאן**

עס האט די קליינע ציפעלע  
פארביסן זיך א ליפעלע.  
א. ציפעלע, וואס ווינסטו?  
אן עפעלע, דאס מיינסטו?

ניין, ניין, ניין.

דו וויסט נישט וואס איך מיינ.

עס האט די קליינע ציפעלע  
פארקניפט איר מויל א קניפעלע.  
א. ציפעלע, וואס ווינסטו?  
צוויי עפעלעך, דאס מיינסטו?

ניין, ניין, ניין.

דו וויסט נישט וואס איך מיינ.

און סטרייסלט זיך איר קעפעלע  
צוזאמען מיט איר צעפעלע.  
א. ציפעלע, וואס ווינסטו?  
דריי עפעלעך, דאס מיינסטו?

ניין, ניין, ניין.

איך וויל א קוש, נישט מיינ.

Little Tsipele bit her lip./Why are you crying,  
Tsipele?/Do you want an apple?

No, no, no./You don't understand me.

Little Tsipele pursed her lips in a knot./Why are you  
crying, Tsipele?/Do you want two apples?/

No, no, no./You don't understand me.

And her little head trembles/Together with her little  
braid./Why are you crying, Tsipele?/Do you want  
three apples?

No, no, no./I just want a kiss, nothing more.

**SORELE****שרהלע איז אין וואלד אָוועק**

שרהלע איז אין וואלד אָוועק-וועק-וועק  
ריסן בלומען א בוקיעט-קיעט-קיעט.  
בלאָזט א ווינטעלע א קיל, קיל, קיל.  
אלע בימער שטייען שטיל, שטיל, שטיל.

פלוצלינג הערט זיך ערגעץ ווינט, ווינט, ווינט.  
א קוקאָוועק ערגעץ שרייט, שרייט, שרייט.  
ווענדט זיך שרהלע צו איר, איר, איר:  
א בקשהלע צו דיר, דיר, דיר.

נאָג מיר, פייגעלע, דו מיין, מיין, מיין.  
וויפל וועט מיין לעבן זיין, זיין, זיין?  
זעכציק, אַכציק, הונדערט יאָר, יאָר, יאָר.  
כהאָב ליב דרך, פייגעלע, ביז גאָר, גאָר, גאָר.

Sorele went away to the woods/To pick a bunch of  
flowers./A cool wind blows,/And all the trees stand still.

Suddenly you can hear from afar/A cuckoo bird  
screaming somewhere./So Sorele turns to her:/A little  
request for you.

Tell me, little bird of mine,/How long will my life  
be?/Sixty, eighty, a hundred years./I love you, little  
bird, so much.



PAULA TEITELBAUM  
Photo by Roland (Ruvn) Millman

## Reading/Commentary/Performance

Bina Weinreich

### IMAGES OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN YIDDISH FOLKTALES: FROM THE REBELLIOUS TO THE GOODY TWO-SHOES

The last story Bina Weinreich read and commented on in her presentation was *Skotsl kumt* (*Skotsl's here*), Tale 103, p. 246, in the collection *Yiddish Folktales*, which she edited.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE STORY<sup>2</sup>

You know that among Yiddish speakers, the expression *Skotsl kumt* (*Skotsl's here*) is used by women to greet another woman when she comes into the house. Would you like to know its origin? I'll tell you a story that will explain it.

Once upon a time the women complained that everything in the world belonged to men. Men got to perform the *mitsves*, the religious commandments; they got called to read from the Torah. In short, they got to do everything. As for the women, they got nothing. No one paid them any attention at all. So they decided to form a deputation that would take their complaint to the Lord of the Universe.

But how was it to be done? Well, they decided that they would heap women up in a pile, one on top of the other, until the woman at the very tip could pull herself into heaven.

The first thing they did, then, was to dig a pit in which one of the women knelt. Then other women climbed on her, one on top of the other. At the top of the pile was *Skotsl*. Because she was both very clever and a skillful speaker, she was chosen as the one to talk with the Lord of the Universe.

Everything went well as the women were climbing onto each other. But just as *Skotsl* reached the top, the hunchbacked woman at the base of the pile twisted about, and the women came tumbling down. Well, of course, there was nothing but noise and confusion, with everyone trying to locate everyone else. But *Skotsl* was nowhere to be found, though they searched for her everywhere. And so there was no one who could be counted on to talk with God, and the situation of the women remained unchanged. Everything still belonged to the men.

But from that time on, women have not lost their hope that one day *Skotsl* will come. And that's why, whenever a woman comes into a house, they call out joyfully, "*Skotsl kumt*, Here comes *Skotsl*," because who knows—one day she might really be there.<sup>3</sup>

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Now I'd like to quickly sum up:

- Girls and women do appear in every genre of Yiddish folk narratives: *mayselekh far kleyne kinder*

(stories for very young children); *vunder-mayses* (fairy tales; tales of wonder); *mayses mit a muser-haskl* (animal fables and pious tales with a moral at the end); *mesoyres* (local legends); *legendes* (there is even one about a reincarnated Queen Esther); *komishe anekdotn* (humorous anecdotes).

- All the ages of woman are represented in the Yiddish tales—from very young girls to great-grandmothers.
- The stories reflect attitudes and values of the period in which they were told in traditional society in Eastern Europe. Although today my focus was on the *khutspedike* (the woman with nerve or gall), rebellious, nonconformists, for a complete picture of how women are treated in Yiddish folktales, I want to mention again that the majority of pre-1940 Yiddish folk narratives represent women as *conformists*, as "good girls and women" and extol women's piety, fidelity, modesty, charity, their important role in the practical world as breadwinners and advice-givers to their spouses, and as teachers of proper values to the next generation. There are, however, tales about mean-spirited, stingy, hen-pecking women, who, of course, are punished for their misdeeds.

None of the above, though, were the subject of today's readings. Let's turn to these again. We have seen that girls or women who are disobedient, nonconforming, or rebellious are not treated uniformly in the stories just read. In those where they are punished, the methods of punishment vary:

- **Fright:** The little girl in the first story, "The Naughty Little Girl" (Tale 26, p. 60), was *frightened* into submission during her scary visit with the *babetskele* (little granny).
- **Ostracism:** The girl who wanted her parents to find her a mate, in "Sore Khane at the Tip of the Church Tower" (Tale 19, p. 45), was *ostracized* by her parents and brother and not allowed back into the house.
- **Poked fun at:** In the story about the women's *minyán*, "The Ten Women" (Tale 98, p. 237), women's desire for first-class citizenship in the religious sphere was laughed at.

Those were the tales in which the women did not get what they were after.

On the other hand, I did read some stories in which women did get what they wanted: as did the clever riddle solver in "The Clever Girl: A Riddle Tale" (Tale 71, p. 207) and as did Reb Leybele Vasertreger's daughter in another story (Vilna Archive Folder 26:15, YIVO Institute). And how did they do this? By means of their *wit and adventurous spirit*.

These are tales that should please the modern feminist. Here there are some role models.

Finally, *patience* is another method for winning in the end, and I think you will agree with me that the heroine of the last story, Skotsl, for whom women have waited so patiently, *iz take shoyen do mit undz*, is indeed already among us. Skotsl has arrived at last and is here with us at this very conference.

<sup>1</sup>*Yiddish Folktales*, ed. Beatrice Silverman Weinreich, trans. Leonard Wolf, Pantheon Books, New York (published in cooperation with YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1988), Tale 103, p. 246. COLLECTOR: I. Olsvanger, n.d. SOURCE: Olsvanger, Immanuel. 1931. *Rosinkess mit mandlen*, 2nd ed. Schweitzer Gesellschaft f'Yr Volkskunde, Basle, no. 364, p. 259.

<sup>2</sup>Like Tale 98, "The Ten Women," this story also points to women's dissatisfaction with their limited role in the religious sphere. It ends on a somewhat more optimistic note: Women keep hoping that this will change with Skotsl's return.

<sup>3</sup>From *Yiddish Folktales*, by Beatrice Weinreich-Silverman. Copyright © 1988 by YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Reprinted by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

## Eve Sicular

### GOOD GIRLS, BAD GIRLS: CROSSDRESSING AND MISOGYNY IN YIDDISH FILM

The following are the films and film clips I showed and my comments on each.

*East & West (Ost und west [sic])*; Austria, 1923. Molly Picon plays the irreverent "Mollie Brown" in drag as a yeshiva *bokher*. Her father spansk her for this prank. This film, made before immigration quotas restricted movement between eastern Europe and the New World, shows an "antinostalgic" picture of traditional *shtetl* life. Molly is allowed to be naughty, in contrast to later framings of her cross-dressed routine.

*Jewish Luck (Yevreyskoye schastye)*; USSR, 1925. Exhibited two frame-stills from YIVO archives, before-and-after pictures from Menakhem Mendl's matchmaking attempt, in which two women meet in bridal gowns. *Kale-kale mazl tov?* Hardly. Other scenes depict his entrepreneurial fantasies of exporting brides by ship and boxcar.

*Uncle Moses (Onkel Moses)*; US, 1932. Maurice Schwartz stars as the crass, voracious sweatshop owner later changed by his love of a "good girl" (played by ubiquitous Jewish blonde Judith Abarbanel), who dares denounce him as a "brute—beast—dog!"

*Yiddle with His Fiddle (Yidl mitn fidl)*; US/Poland, 1936. Molly Picon portrays the dutiful cross-dressed daughter, resembling the lead character in *Mamele*, a streetwise, but nice, self-sacrificing girl who takes care of her widowed father. As Yidl, a klezmer musician, Molly must disguise herself as a

boy for the sake of modesty. Producer-director Joseph Green took Picon's already popular, vicariously thrilling girl-in-boys'-clothing routine and used it to make Yidl a gender construction project, including a remarkably didactic dream sequence on gender as role. Yidl plays an effeminate, high-strung "boy" constantly exhorted to "Be a man!" Most of the film's slapstick homophobic jokes play on the idea of Yidl's attraction to Froim, another klezmer musician. By film's end, Yidl comes out on stage as a female and asks the audience about the questionable taste or sense in two guys being together. Needless to say, Yidl gets her Froim.

*The Dybbuk (Der dibuk)*; Poland, 1937. An erotic scene at the *shabes tish* as Leye and Khonon silently play out their attraction during the rituals of prayer and washing, thwarting the control of the patriarch, who has other nuptial plans for his daughter. Similar nonverbal allusions to unsanctioned passions emerge in the equally controlled domestic setting of the girls' sewing room, where eyes meet and the girls smile knowingly among themselves.

*Jolly Paupers (Freylekhe kabtsonim)*; Poland, 1937. The comedy team of Dzigan and Shumacher make slapstick misogyny. A medicine bottle routine relies on the confusion of Yiddish pronouns to misunderstand the wife's doctor's direction to "shake it (her) up." Older women nag and scold constantly; a daughter is the foolish victim of romancing; but the wives are shown as the true nexus of power and decision-making in the family, particularly regarding finances, despite the men's independent posturing among themselves. While the two *luftmentshn* tell each other that their business agreements will be secret, each turns to his wife in bed that night for advice.

*Mamele (Mamele)*; Poland/U.S., 1938. Molly Picon is the spunky, self-sacrificing *meydl*-next-door, again in love with a handsome musician. Fundamental to each of Molly's two leading roles for producer-director Joseph Green is the repression of desire. Her attachment to cute, furry animals is used metaphorically to represent her characters' wholesome innocence; watch especially for the cuddly kittens featured in each film.

*A Letter to Mother (A brivele der mamen)*; Poland/U.S., 1939. The eternally suffering but indomitable female head of the household endures every crisis, keeping the good of the family paramount. Faced with the moral dilemma of her engaged daughter's affair with a married man, she struggles to keep the secret from the girl's fiancé at all costs and eventually convinces her jilted daughter that she should go through with her wedding, putting the scandalous past behind her forever.

*American Matchmaker (Amerikaner shadkhn)*; US, 1940. In the midst of this screwball comedy about nice Jewish bachelor Nat Silver, we meet his mother



and sister, and, later, his eventual bride, three women more onto Nat than he is himself. Nat's gay tendencies are hinted at throughout the film (see the butler's soliloquy with the household canary for the most overt reference). Meanwhile, in a cameo role, Nat's sister, the not-so-nice, jaded but still good-hearted Elvie (Khavale) shows distinct signs of rebellion against traditional/female roles, dressing in a mannish tailored outfit, making fun of old-fashioned traditional Jews ("the cowboys in the black hats") and flaunting her contempt for marriage as in her *oyf yinglish* response to her brother's offer to provide a dowry: *Nadn iz alright, nor der khosn shtet arayn in seyf* (A dowry's fine, but keep the groom in a vault). The assimilated, sporty, *allrightnik* female, Elvie, could clearly be construed as having subtextual lesbian tendencies: As played by Anna Guskin, she is full of bad tomboy attitude, but her dismissive attitude toward potential husbands and childbearing hints at something more, in the semiotic codes of the day. Elvie's identity is largely negatively defined by what she rejects. Lesbianism is even more invisible than gay male possibilities, perhaps because, as Nat's mother says, her son's troubles worry her a lot more than her daughter's, a primacy seemingly reflected in the film. As to figuring Nat out, his mother and his future bride get the best lines. The mother likens him to a never-before-mentioned uncle from the family skeleton closet, while his "sophisticated" would-be fiancée analyzes Nat as a "ying! A mama's boy!"—echoing certain then-popular theories on the etiology of male homosexuality.

**Overture to Glory** (*Der vilner shtot-khazn*); US, 1940. Virtuoso nineteenth-century Cantor Yoel-Dovid Strashunsky's temptation to learn opera leads to his double life frequenting a goyish classical salon. His secretive behavior leads his family to believe he may be having an affair, but once found out, he is torn by the desire to continue to follow his musical passions. His loving wife, Khane, agrees to cover for him as he returns to the seductive, forbidden world of secular song. Representatives of the glamorous Warsaw Opera are shown as condescending, elitist fops with a mission to recruit the vulnerable *khazn*, fitting closely the classic stereotype of the predatory homosexual Other. Khane's self-sacrificing compassion ("the sin will be on me") makes her a kind of "beard" for her husband.

**Catskill Honeymoon**; US, 1950. The opening chorus line shows a lesbophobic stage moment (one woman rests her head on another's shoulder, only to elicit a swift, mortified shrug as rebuff).

**Rise and Fall of the Borscht Belt**; US, 1984. A documentary history that includes home-movie footage of racy parties with voice-over, particularly describing the "mock marriage," a do-it-yourself adult entertainment popular throughout the mountain resort

colonies, in which women dressed as grooms, best men, and traditional rabbis while men played the roles of brides and bridesmaids.

## Beyle Schaechter-Gottesman

### THE POETRY AND SONGS OF BEYLE SCHAECHTER-GOTTESMAN<sup>1</sup>

I'm frequently asked: Why do I write, and why in Yiddish? I'll start with the second question: I'm a born Yiddish speaker; I grew up with love of and utter attachment to my language and culture. My father was devoted with the Chasidic fervor of that generation to Yiddish, which was in those days the center of a decisive fight over its position in Jewish life. Nobody in our home would speak another language to each other, though we lived in Czernowitz, a city in which most Jews spoke German.

Our home was quite literary oriented. Our father read Jules Verne to us in Yiddish and, later, our classic and modern literature, which we listened to with great joy. My very first encounter with the Yiddish literary world was a children's book, Eliezer Shteynberg's *Alef beys*. This little masterpiece opened to me the magic of the graphic world, since the three illustrators turned out to be some of our best artists. I wanted to become an artist all my life, and I did. But when our public school teacher asked us what we wanted to be when we grew up, I answered without intention or thinking: a poet. Yet I didn't write poetry until I had my children. I wanted them to practice Yiddish, and so I started to write poems and stories for them. As it happened, I became a Yiddish teacher for the Workmen's Circle and Sholem Aleichem schools, and this gave me a chance to write plays and poems, which I published in *Pedagogisher buletin* (Pedagogic bulletin) and *Kinder tsaytung* (Children's newspaper), as well as *Kinder zhurnal* (Children's journal), for which I became the editor in 1970. I also published a children's book, *Mir forn* (We're off), and edited a children's magazine done entirely by children: *Enge-Benge*.

My road took a natural turn when I stopped teaching small children and my own children grew up. That gave me the freedom to look about me, and I started writing poetry.

My poems are mostly introspective, with a surrealist touch. I find great joy in writing poetry and composing songs if I feel the result is to my satisfaction. In the first phase of my writing, I did almost all the writing and editing in my head, finally putting down on paper an almost finished product. But later, I worked much more on a poem, and many a song or poem was discarded or redone.

I published my first book of poetry, *Steshkes tsivishn moyern* (Footpaths amid stone walls), in 1970. Next came *Sharey* (Dawn), in 1980, and in 1990,

*Zumerteg* (Summer days), a book of songs with my lyrics and music, followed by a cassette of the same name. In 1995, the first collection of my poems in Yiddish with English translation—*Lider* (Poems)—was published by Cross Cultural Communications.

How is it that I write music without being a formally trained composer or musician? I failed to mention that singing was one of the best entertainments in our home, and my mother was a terrific singer with a mile-long repertoire. Thus music, especially Yiddish songs, is in my bones, and it comes to me quite naturally.

A new book of songs for children is ready for publication, and I hope a cassette will follow. A volume of Yiddish poetry is also waiting its turn.

Here are two selections from *Zumerteg*:<sup>1</sup>

### A MOMENT

#### א רגע

ווען דו זאלסט קיין מאָל מער נישט זיין  
און איך בין קיין מאָל מער נישט דין.  
ביסטו געווען איין מאָל מיין.  
אייביק מיין א רגע.  
א רגע, א רגע.  
אייביק מיין א רגע.

דו גייסט אַוועק, אַוועק אין ווייט.  
אַן אַנדער גאַס, אַ פֿרעמדע צייט.  
נאָר אייביק זענען מיר צו צווייט  
געגאַנגען פֿאַר אַ רגע.  
אַ רגע, אַ רגע.  
געגאַנגען פֿאַר אַ רגע.

איך צייל די טראָפּנס אין מיין האַנט  
אויסגעפערלטע ביינאַנד.  
הענג זיי אויף אויף מיין געוואַנט.  
אייביק איז די רגע.  
די רגע, די רגע.  
אייביק איז די רגע.

If you were no more/And I were no longer yours,/Yet  
you were once mine/Forever mine for a moment./A  
moment, a moment/Forever mine for a moment.

You go away, far away./Another street, a strange  
time./Yet we were eternally/Together for a moment./  
A moment, a moment/Together for a moment.

I count the drops in my hand,/A strand of pearls,/ Hang them on my garb,/Eternal is the moment./The moment, the moment,/Eternal is the moment.

### WOUNDED BIRD

#### קראַנקער פֿויגל

ס'איז דין חלום, קראַנקער פֿויגל,  
גאַנץ אומזיסט, גאַנץ אומנישט.  
אין די ווייטע הימלען ציען  
וועסטו קיין מאָל נישט.

האַטט צוויי פליגל, יא, דו פֿאַכעסט.  
אַבער פליען קענסטו נישט מיט זיי.  
אַזוי פיל צער אין דינע אויגן...  
קראַנקער פֿויגל, ס'טוט דין חלום זיי.

זאָג, ווי האָט עס דיר געטראָפֿן  
ווער האָט עס געקענט דין אומגליק זיין  
עפעס דאָרט אַ בייזער שפּאַרבער.  
צי אפשר גאָר אַ נאָענטער חבר דין?

ווייל אַ חבר קען עס בעסער.  
ער האָט אַלץ וואָס דו פֿאַרמאָגסט אין האַנט.  
שטעכט ער דיר אַרין אַ מעסער  
און ער פליט אַוועק אין אַ וואַרעם לאַנד.

You dream in vain,/Wounded bird,/The distant skies  
/You'll never reach.

You have two wings, yes, you flap them,/But still  
you cannot fly./So much sorrow in your  
eyes./Wounded bird, your dream hurts me.

Tell me how it happened?/Who could be the cause of  
it?/A vicious hawk, perhaps?/Or—one of your close  
friends?

Because a friend does it better./He has you in the  
palm of his hand./So he can plunge a knife into  
you/And fly away to a warm land.

<sup>1</sup> Shulamis Dion was the musical accompanist.

<sup>2</sup> *Zumerteg*: *tsvuntsik zinglider* (Summerdays: twenty Yiddish songs), Yiddish Language Resource Center, New York, 1990.

## SESSION III

### Panels

#### ***Feminist Themes in Women's Writing***

***Deborah Dash Moore, Chair***

**Ethel Raicus**

#### **ROKHL BROKHES**

About four years ago, when we first read the story "*Di zogerin*," by Rokhl Brokhes, her name was new to all of us, including those who had loved and studied Yiddish all their lives.

A felicitous name Brokhes, for it means "benedictions," from the Hebrew *brakhot*. It is a matronymic, taken from the Hebrew feminine name Brakha, probably when the Jews in eastern Europe were first required to assume surnames.

Brokhes was born in the city of Minsk, White Russia (present-day Belarus), September 23, 1880, and perished there in the Minsk ghetto, sixty-five years later. She had been starved and tortured by the Nazis, murdered, and thrown into a mass grave.

For approximately forty years, Rokhl Brokhes was an acclaimed and widely read Yiddish writer. As *Found Treasures* points out, she had over two hundred short stories, novellas, theater pieces, and children's stories to her credit. She was only nineteen when her first short story, "Yankele," was published in St. Petersburg. It drew immediate attention to the gifted young woman, who was only sixteen when she wrote it.

Brokhes was a prodigy; but then we know that she had, by age nine, read with ease the *Tanakh* and the works of Mapu (the first modern-Hebrew novelist) in the original Hebrew and was keeping a diary. Her father had been her teacher.

Volf Brokhes was a *maskil* (a disciple of the Enlightenment), a gifted—but impoverished—Hebrew writer who was never published. He died when Rokhl was nine, and soon after she went to work as a seamstress. Eventually she became a teacher of needlework at the Minsk Jewish Vocational School for Girls. However, from age nineteen on, her work appeared regularly in book form and in periodicals, including *Tsukunft*, published in New York City. Her work was read in Russia, Lithuania, and the United States and was translated from Yiddish into Russian, German, and English until 1941. At that time, the Germans entered Minsk and destroyed a state publishing house project, the publication of an eight-volume set of Brokhes's collected works. Indeed, the first volume had already been typeset.

By the time Frieda Forman went looking for Brokhes's work in 1990, no one knew who Brokhes

was—not even at YIVO. All had disappeared, writer and writings, readers, her very name and memory. By 1990, Rokhl Brokhes had been resolved, to paraphrase the poet, into a mystery. Until a few months ago, the sum total of information we had about her came from the approximately seven hundred and fifty words in Zalman Reisen's *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur* (and the second edition of the lexicon) and anything we guessed to be autobiographical, in the one sketch and thirteen short stories we had been able to find.

In mid-August of last year (1995) the situation began to change. The University of Toronto Library helped us locate Avrom Reisen's memoir, *Epizodn fun mayn lebn* (Episodes from my life), describing life in the literary circles of pre-Revolutionary Minsk. But best of all, as it turned out, Reisen was actually a close acquaintance of Brokhes. She now became for us real and human, snatched from intended oblivion in the mass grave that we had yet to hear about.

In *Epizodn fun mayn lebn*, Avrom Reisen described seventeen-year-old Rokhl Brokhes as tall, slim, reserved, with a strong, well-modulated voice and bobbed hair. She was "big city" to the likes of Reisen. Her many admirers waited to be noticed. Among them were Reisen himself and Avrom Liesin, the famous socialist poet (his work hectographed and illegal) and, later, editor of *Tsukunft*. Reisen describes his almost daily visits to her home and Liesin's poem of "... longing for a distant beloved." He also described a farewell theater date with Brokhes and her mother's pleasure in it, knowing how much her daughter loved the theater. Brokhes was then seventeen; Reisen, twenty-five.

The above is not exactly about Yiddish literature; it is about seeing in the mind's eye a woman who was meant to disappear and the sudden, overwhelming realization that it was not to be. It has been prevented. There are still unanswered questions, but there is no longer a nothingness—a vapor.

By the end of the 1800s the great migration from eastern Europe was on, and many writers emigrated to America and Palestine, Liesin and Reisen among them. Brokhes remained in Minsk all her life, except for a short period following her marriage to a dentist. It is not at all clear who he was. He is never mentioned again—nor when they married.

At some point, probably taking advantage of the relaxed domiciliary restrictions, she and her husband left the Pale to settle in the province of Saratova on the steppes of the Volga, several hundred miles southeast of Moscow. By 1920 the family was back in Minsk,

driven by the dislocation and famine that followed the Revolution. Of whom did the family consist at that point? Brokhes mentions "my children" in a sketch entitled "On the Volga Steppes with the Germans" (*Tsukunft*, August 1926).

By the end of the 1800s, Minsk had over 47,000 Jews, about 52 percent of the total population. It was a vibrant center of Jewish life. *Misnagdim*, anti-Chasidic skeptics, were strong; Chasidim were not quite as influential. *Maskilim* had founded schools there with curricula incorporating general subjects alongside the traditional. All brands of socialism argued their logic and vied for the allegiance of the emerging working class. Delegates from Minsk participated in the founding of the Bund (1897), and Minsk Bundists were targeted in the 1905 antiliberal riots. Zionists were a presence in Minsk from the days of the Kibbutz Zion in the 1880s, and by 1918 the General and Labor Zionists together were the majority in the community elections.

Rokhl Brokhes was there throughout all that tumult, but there is nothing overtly political in the stories we have from her—no depictions of Minsk, of political movements, of political activity. She seems actually to have lived in Saratova during the years of the war and the Revolution. Brokhes was cut off in that period from the Jewish literary community. She continued to write, however, if not to publish, but she must have done a lot of writing during that time for the state publishing house to have planned an eight-volume set of her collected works. Where is the material now? Where are the manuscripts? We do not know.

Brokhes's voice was passionate, a cry for the deprived and the abandoned. To paraphrase the critic Uri Fink, writing after her death, Brokhes drew her themes from "the poorest streets of the Pale where the Jewish masses were to be found in all their misery and despair. And she sought to draw them out of their cellars into the sun." Her voice was compassionate as well, but often enough, in the throats of her characters, the voices were harsh, coarse, and almost unbearably cruel.

"*Avremelekh*" is a story about illegitimate infants abandoned to the angry care of old, impoverished "Bobe" Brayne. They are laid out in every imaginable receptacle, mewling in their hunger. She cannot feed them. Her miserable one-room shack is really a way station and she a Charon helping them to the next world.

All the baby boys are named Avremele. A two-year-old boy from among them is brought to the home of a nursing mother to relieve her engorged breasts by sucking. He is in paradise: food, light, and human warmth. Avremele charms them. They love him. But the cure for the woman is effected, and he is returned to "Bobe" Brayne—with sweet but total indifference. To make room for new charges, "Bobe" takes him to the populated area of town, puts a bagel in his hand,

and tells him that he should wait until she returns. Passersby make no attempt to help the wailing child.

At one point, while Avremele is nursing, "Bobe" Brayne describes the *mamzeyrimlekh* (the little bastards), the overcrowding in her shack, the poverty, and her inability to feed them all. She doesn't know what to do with Avremele now that his usefulness has ended. The listeners cluck their sympathy for the lovely child, but when Brayne suggests that one of them take him into their comfortable home, they panic. "You see," says Brayne, "No one wants him, but you tell me to take care of him." "We were only saying that Avremele is a beautiful child, that it's a pity . . ." is the answer.

"*Avremelekh*," published in 1940, is one of the last stories we have of Brokhes. The other is "*Shpinen*" (Spiders), a many-layered story of a beggar, a female usurer, and the beggar's wife, who is an absentee participant.

There never was a surfeit of happiness in Brokhes's writing, but in these two stories there is an added cruelty that begs exploration. In some of her stories the action is often an inner one or there is no action at all, without a climax. For example, the story in "*Tshad*" is quiet, and then it just drops away as a sailing ship might off the edge of a flat world. Dvoyre, the twenty-year-old daughter of an impoverished family, has had to work from childhood on. The parents worry about her chances for marriage, since she has neither a dowry nor even a decent dress in which to show herself. Dvoyre enjoys reading her Russian and Yiddish books, and she dreams of love.

A match comes along. He finds favor with everyone except Dvoyre; she cannot bear him near her. At her betrothal, she pleads a headache so as not to reveal her misery. Understanding the relief and joy of her parents at the prospect of her marriage, she decides to accept a man she cannot abide, whom she sees as the angel of death. And so, a soul goes under right there, surrounded by all who love her and wish her well. They sit sipping tea and talking about "important matters." She thinks that "maybe that's the way it must be, till a person becomes accustomed . . ." End of story!

Brokhes's themes were inequity, exploitation, entrapment, indifference, self-absorption, greed, remorse, penitence, hopelessness, hunger, fatuity, sacrifice. Her passion, social justice, seems to hark back to influences stemming from the Haskalah. When the *maskilim* turned toward the Enlightenment, they brought with them their history, culture, and literature. In seeking social justice, Brokhes seemed to leap backward, past the socialism and Marxism of her day. It was a sweeping search for a world corrected, made better. The wellspring of her passion, as it was for many socialists, seems to have been the book of *n'viyim* (Prophets), learned as a child from her *maskil* father.

The short story "Di zogerin" is, as mentioned earlier, the Brokhes story we have lived with the longest and, I believe, have reached into the most deeply. It is included in *Found Treasures*, in a translation by Shirley Kumove. In the women's synagogue, behind the *mekhitse*, the *zogerin* reads the service for the women, many of whom are illiterate. On request, she also intercedes on their behalf with prayers, both serious and trivial; a cure for the sick, a desirable *shidekh*, food for the table, that a petitioner's only cow be safely delivered of her calf. Then one day, in her grandson's presence, the *zogerin* explodes, yelling and cursing at the injustice of her situation.

"No, I say; enough is enough! On their behalf I prayed, for their benefit I cried my eyes out. Enough! I say, no! May I be struck dumb if I will say one more word." She had a strong chin. She was a *zogerin*. A very good one and she argued, "*Reboyne-sheloylem*, kind Father, You alone know how I have prayed both summer and winter, never missed a *shabes*. . . . On their behalf what have I not prayed for? Wealth, length of days, pleasure from the children. . . ." (pp. 85-86)

She complains that she can hardly earn enough to feed her grandson, must beg for favors, and is constantly humiliated. She ends her tirade with an angry declaration that she will henceforth pray only for herself.

This story can be interpreted in several ways:

1. An overwrought woman driven to the brink of madness by poverty, marginalization, hopelessness; alive only when entering as some kind of adjunct into other people's striving. Her function once fulfilled and their goal achieved, she is deleted as though she had never been,
2. OR the story is about a woman who has a revelation, who has suddenly achieved center stage in her own life's drama,
3. OR the story is a metaphor for the artist's struggle to gain that sense of self, consciously or unconsciously, without which there can be no creative imagination,
4. OR, finally, the story is a metaphor for the great debate of that time which was going on in Minsk, as elsewhere: Will relief from the misery of Jewish life in eastern Europe come within the context of a proletarian revolution, or can Jewish hopelessness be reversed only through self-conscious effort by Jews in a Jewish homeland?

The story "*Misterye*" is a kind of fairy- or folk-tale. In a very large city at the end of a very long street that was sometimes so muddy that you could not cross it, there stands a little house, part of which is home to the *shames*, his wife, and his daughter, Reyzl, and part of which serves as a combined synagogue and *besmedresh* (house of study).

Reyzl is a wig maker. She is beautiful, wise, a doer

of good deeds, and she is lame. She is revered in the town and had received many offers of marriage, all of which she has refused. At night, after her parents had gone to bed, Reyzl, having concluded her works of charity, would get down to her wig making. It was then that she could hear, coming from the other side of the house the melancholy study-chant of the mysterious, ascetic scholar who had settled there. It was thought that he had left the noisy world (probably released by a wife) to devote his life to study. Reyzl imagines this woman as having grown in stature in her struggle to understand and to decide on such a sacrifice. This, in turn, leads her to speculate about the nature of inner growth. Fantasies less than spiritual intrude. But these go unrecognized, denied, rejected. Her thoughts on the different and the extraordinary run like this:

She, the other woman, is after all his wife. If she was not as big as he, she had to become big and strong for his sake.

And she envied that young wife, because what is the petty life of woman? And what significance have lives of all those around her, who are preoccupied only with themselves. How devalued and workaday they appear as against this one. And how blessed is the one man or woman who can become that big, bigger than all and everything around them.

But how is this achieved? Did the One on High ennoble them at birth and set them apart from all others, or did they by their own strength of will make themselves so?

Then why should she not become an other and better one than she is ....than all the others if it is bound up with will alone.

The story is rich in symbols and images, as well as Brokhes's rare allusion to events in the real world around her: "In the big world, big things were going on, but here in the street to the casual glance, there were almost no changes, other than that elderly people died; but then, others, as though to replace them, grew old."

"*Misterye*" continues:

When, one night there was a noise at the synagogue door. Reyzl heard footsteps and when she opened her door, HE stood there, holding something in his arms. "A child," he said quietly, passing it from hand to hand, "someone has apparently abandoned it." At first there was consternation in the house. A little boy perhaps a couple of days old. Then came the questions: "Why us?" and "Is it our responsibility?" By the time of the first minyan the next morning, the house was full. No one on the street was short of children, and nobody had bread to spare for another mouth.

There were neither offers to take the child, nor advice of any kind. So Reyzl was consulted, and she, of course, refused to give him up. (p. 195)

He would remain in the house of the *shames*.



Reyzl was pleased and excited; her parents, remembering the children they had lost, considered it a godsend. The *shames* bought a little goat which was being led to slaughter for a *finferl*; so there would be fresh milk for the child. (He had to borrow from Beyle *di bekern* to make the deal!) But...

The house was transformed. HE (the ascetic) came often. HE interrupted his studies, stood over the cradle looking at the child in wonder, and said quietly, "A dear, bright child." The child was between them and bound them together. And the bond was blessed with the brightness of the child and the joy that filled Reyzl's being.

The text abounds in symbols and sublimations: the long road sometimes too muddy to cross; the beautiful but lame Reyzl; the study-obsessed ascetic, ready to turn his back on human contact; the little scapegoat, delivered from slaughter to become provider and nourisher; the extraordinary human being, who longs for the ordinary; the unwanted child who transforms the unfulfilled. The story is a *khad gadya* in reverse that proceeds from malevolence to renewal. The doomed little scapegoat nourishes the rejected infant who brings happiness into bleak lives.

During the Soviet period Brokhes is supposed to have written many children's stories. We have five: four published in 1937 and one in 1939, well into the Soviet period. They are instructional and are informed by an idealist's conviction. They have warmth and the knack of bringing the storyteller face to face with the reader. These stories are meant to imbue the young with the dream of a world made good and, of course, with the desire to help make it so.

All together we have twenty-one short stories, five children's stories, and several short segments of a memoir entitled, "On the Volga Steppes with the Germans." Won't it be wonderful to find more!

And letters! It was the friend of her youth, her admirer, Avrom Liesin, later editor of *Tsukunft*, who published so many of her stories. Surely, there was correspondence between contributor and editor. Somewhere in New York will we some day discover packets and packets of letters?

There is a monument on the mass grave that Rokhl Brokhes shares with who knows how many others. I understand that there are no names there but that the grave itself does have a name: *Untern barg* (Beneath the mountain/hill). That happens to be the title of an early story by Brokhes and was probably the name of an industrial district in Minsk where the story is set. *Barg* also means a heap of earth. Often enough, there is a hint of premonition in Brokhes's writing.

In the end, it is Rokhl Brokhes's voice that will be her monument. As her stories are unearthed one by one, they will indeed serve as a blessing.

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## Norma Fain Pratt

### FRADEL SHTOK: MEMORY AND STORYTELLING IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

Before the First World War, only a few young Yiddish women writers, a nascent generation, published their poetry, fiction, and nonfiction both in Eastern Europe and in Jewish immigrant America. Struggling as a minority within the intelligentsia, where men were fashioning a modern, secular, and experimental Yiddish literature, their work expressed female perceptions and aspirations.

Fradel Shtok (1890-circa 1930) was an especially talented young woman poet and short-story writer of this early Yiddish literary generation. Random bits and pieces of biographical information remain to inform us about her life. From literary dictionaries we learn that Shtok was born in 1890 in Skala, a small town in eastern Galicia, not far from Vienna, into an educated family. Nothing more. Her poems that appeared in many different Yiddish newspapers were never collected into one volume, and only rare copies exist of her thirty-eight Yiddish short stories *Gezamelte ertseylungn* (Collected short stories) published in New York in 1919. Her first and unsuccessful English language novel, *Musicians Only*, published in 1927, gathers dust at the Library of Congress. Unfortunately, she shared the fate of all her contemporaries — virtual oblivion.

Yet, in her own time, she succeeded in creating a small but promising body of work in an original literary voice. The breadth of her perceptions, the diversity of her subject matter, and the powerful yet sensitive clarity of her writing place her as an equal among the best turn-of-the-century young immigrant New York male writers. In addition, although she never wrote about political or literary feminism or about the feminist beliefs current in her time, her short stories in particular reveal the mind and imagination of a writer who deeply resonated to the social, economic, and psychological women's issues of the early twentieth century.

We may never discover the real reasons why Shtok became an exceptional writer with a clear sensitivity toward understanding the transitions in women's lives. Literary gossip, intriguing but not nec-



essarily true, bathes her origins in the light of mystery, passion, and madness. She was worshiped for her beauty and suspected of possessing hidden veins of irrationality — the madwoman in the attic. The poet Yaacov Glatshteyn reminisced about her in his 1965 article “*Tsu der biographye fun a dikhterin*” (To a poet’s biography) in *Der morgn zhurnal*: “When I came among the Yiddish writers in 1919, she [Fradel Shtok] was already a legend. They told how she had become very angry and deserted them for the *goyim*. Became an English writer, without success, and it’s only been a few years ago that we discovered that she died in a mental institution.”

Glatshteyn also discovered Jenny Hertzog, one of Shtok’s childhood friends, living in New York in the sixties. The two women, it seems, knew each other from the *shtetl* and both emigrated to New York in 1910. Hertzog told Glatshteyn that Shtok was admired by everyone in the town partly because she “always dressed elegantly, walked proudly, had a beautiful head of black hair and bright curious eyes.” Hertzog not only admired Shtok’s outward appearance but her intellect as well. “She was the best student in the school; played the violin, and recited Schiller and Goethe. She impressed the younger girls as if she were a heroine out of a book.”

Hertzog felt sorry for her friend. Shtok’s mother, who died when the writer was two, had become pregnant before marriage and never loved her husband. Shimon Shtok, a wealthy metal instrument manufacturer, was involved with the local underworld. He scandalized the town by openly cavorting in bars with criminals. “For such a celebration he would dress his pretty daughter in beautiful clothes. The thieves played with her, carried her on their shoulders, threw her in the air, and stood on their heads in order to amuse her,” Hertzog remembered. Convicted of complicity in a set of murders, Shimon died in prison when Shtok was ten. The orphan was raised by her aunt, a poor dressmaker. The woman taunted the unfortunate Shtok with the shame Shimon Shtok had caused the entire family. “Fradel didn’t answer back. Just with her violin,” Hertzog told Glatshteyn.

Shtok published her first poem in 1911, only a year after arriving in New York. The East Side Yiddish male literati lauded her work. A series of poems followed in quick succession, several about her girlhood in Eastern Europe in a folk style and other, more innovative poems about flirtation and womanly love, in a new sonnet form. One of her most popular poems, “*Du trogst dos harts*” (You wear your heart), captures her special kind of playfully sad ambivalence:

You wear your heart within your/silent  
eyes,/always there, to/remind me of/my many  
sins, that/punish you/and already bend your proud

head/into submission. . . /Am I really worth  
those silent/eyes of yours?

In 1914, she was the only woman to be invited to join the inner sanctum of a new rebel literary movement *Di yunge* (The youth). Intending to separate themselves from the older generation, whose literary themes emphasized social injustice, oppression, and socialist alternatives, *Di yunge* heralded a personal, individualistic, and introspective approach to modern Yiddish poetry. Along with I. J. Schwartz, Joseph Rolnik Chaimowitch, and Joseph Opatashu, Fradel Shtok published a literary magazine, *Di naye heym* (The new home).

At this time Shtok not only contributed poetry and short stories to her own and other literary journals but also mused on new theories of poetic expression. In her “*Vos iz poezie?*” (What is poetry?), which first appeared in *Fun mentsh tsu mentsh: a zamlbukh far poezye* (From person to person: a collection of poetry), edited by Moyshe Leyb Halpern in 1915, she vacillates between a realistic and a romantic interpretation of the meaning of her art. “Poetry should reflect real life but the human soul is, after all, a mystery,” she contends. The poet should cultivate language and develop a craft that makes the reader’s “organic body respond” and “express energy.” But she sums it all up at the end of her article with “*dos shenste lid iz fort dos lebn*” (life, after all, is the most beautiful poem).

It was the richness of life, its unexpected diversity, and the harsh reality of human behavior that captured Shtok’s imagination in her prose collection of thirty-eight short stories published in 1919. Intellectually daring, especially for such a young woman, she looks at the frailties, hypocrisies, and illusions of the Old World she left behind. She has the *khutspe* — the guts and strength — to write in the literary tradition of late-nineteenth-century social satirists like Mendele Mokher Sforim, uncovering layers of deceit, pomposity, and irrationality in the *shtetl*. There is no nostalgia here. With a critical, observant, analytical woman’s eye she records the collective rituals, the social pathologies, and the meanness of small-town life in Galicia. Her grasp of how class and gender lines are drawn in the *shtetl* is firm. Her understanding of how severe the consequences of intellectual stagnation and conformity are in punishing the individual victim is compassionate. Shtok’s stories do not offer “solutions.” Accepting the malfunctioning of the human condition as natural, she characterizes human nature in Jewish society with broad strokes of irony.

In her stories, she describes how the birthpangs of modernity in the *shtetl* are accompanied by human cruelty, misunderstanding, and mass hysteria. Inhabitants of the *shtetl*, rife with superstition and gossip, victimize their innocent neighbors. For example, “*Dos glezl*” (The glass) is a poignant story about a young *kheder*

boy shocked when his impoverished teacher, Reb Gitman, is ostracized by the school's parents because it was rumored that he knew one of the older students possessed a *secular* book. The student who supposedly committed this crime of irreligiosity in Reb Gitman's classroom had been severely beaten by his father to elicit the confession. The boy (and the reader) is not sure whether the informant actually told the truth. Without a trial or even a discussion, all the parents remove their children from the school and cause the teacher to lose his meager livelihood and perhaps even his life. Shtok opens her story with the voice of public anxiety: "A *shtik tsayt iz geven a roysh in shtot—a kleynikayt. Gitman, der gemora melamed an apikoris. . . vos, ven men kikt zikh nit arum b'tsaytns, shmadt er oys der gantser shtetl*" (For quite a long time there was a clamor in town — a small thing. Gitman, the Gemora teacher, an apostate . . . what, if we don't watch nowadays, the entire town would be converted).

The breaking of yet another taboo — a married woman not shaving her head but wearing her own hair — and the response of the townspeople is the theme of "*Hinde Gitl's shnur*" (Hinde Gitl's daughter-in-law). In this story the entire town is alive with malicious gossip because Hinde Gitl's beautiful new daughter-in-law refuses to cut her hair after marriage. They see this as a sign that she thinks herself to be superior to the old ways. Mesmerized, the townspeople peer at her as she sits at her window selling milk and dairy products without noticing them or offering an explanation. She engenders erotic fantasies. Her own brother-in-law falls in love with her. Old women swear they observed her out in the middle of the night.

They began to talk about her in the town . . . repeating how she got up at night, unbraided her hair, and wandered from one garden to the next, one garden to the next. And one of the old women swore: "I saw with my own eyes how she washed her face between the flowers at night . . . it is not a coincidence she is so radiant. . . ." And others swore: "She bathes herself in milk . . . every night she bathes herself in milk. . . it is not a coincidence her hands are like silver."

The male protagonists in Shtok's stories are not stereotypical villains or heroes, nor are they stock variations of *shtetl* masculine ineptitude, the *shlemil* or the *shlimazl*, frequently portrayed in Yiddish literature. Her male characters range widely in the roles they play in the family, in village politics, in scholarship, and in creative endeavors. She offers a gallery of male portraits, each image drawn with individual strengths and peculiar flaws. Her male subjects range from Moyshe, in "*Der trakter*" (The thinker), who fails to find work in immigrant America, to Moyshe Schnayder, in "Moyshe Schnayder," whose almost magical skill at dressmaking makes him the most powerful man in his *shtetl*.

Although Moyshe the Thinker's wife and children despise him for causing the family's poverty, resiliently he finds solace in religion, as the opening sentence of the story informs us: "*Do in land hot Moyshe plut-sim ongehoybn shtark tsu gloybn in got*" (Here in this land Moyshe suddenly began to have a strong belief in God). Also, contrary to all expectations, he begins to depend on the family dog for emotional sustenance. At first, he criticizes the children for bringing the animal home, claiming a pet is an unrealistic American luxury. By the end of the story, he lavishes food and love on the animal to the amazement of everyone.

Moyshe Schnayder is highly respected by the author for his vast skill as a successful dressmaker and his passion for his work. Shtok describes with relish and detail the creative process he experiences in designing and sewing garments. Unfortunately, it is his involvement in his work which causes his second marriage to fail. His new wife, a woman from a more urban and sophisticated town, comes to live in Moyshe's *shtetl*. Bored by the mundane social environment and because he is entirely preoccupied with his craft, she leaves him and returns to a more stimulating city life.

That men are more traditional than women is a recurring theme in all of Shtok's stories. While there are many stories about long-suffering wives and *tsniesdike* (pious) daughters, Shtok's female protagonists often yearn to get away into the wide world of excitement and opportunity, like Moyshe Schnayder's wife, who is restless in a small town. In fact, the first story in Shtok's collection, "*Di ershte ban*" (The first train), is about Nesi, whose obsession with this iron horse entering her town and linking her with the city drives her to the edge of madness. Telling no one, she simply boards the train one day and disappears in the company of an itinerant Zionist organizer. Much like Nesi, Shifra in the story "*Komediantn*" (Comedians) spends sleepless nights fantasizing about a traveling circus acrobat. The fact that he has the right to come and go as he will attracts the young girl, whose life is stiflingly predictable.

Some of Shtok's heroines rebel against their circumstances. As noted earlier, Hinde Gitl's *shnur* refuses to cut her hair. Shayndl in "*Opgeshnitene hor*" (Shorn hair) is widowed after a brief, unfulfilled marriage to an old man. She hides her newly sprouting hair under her wig while slowing weaving her hair into the wig. Finally, her hair entirely grown back, she is able to discard the wig. On the way to reveal herself to her girlfriend, she encounters an older woman in the *shtetl* who drowns her in insults and recriminations: "*Staytsh! A yidishe tokhter, un nokh fun aza frumer mamen . . .*" (Shame! A Yiddish daughter, and from such a pious mother).

There are a few female characters who openly

flaunt their freedom and sexuality in Shtok's stories. The most blatant is found in "Mandlen" (Almonds). Hinde, a young barmaid, enjoys her seductive power over men, flirting outrageously in public with them and reveling in her own sexual feelings.

In 1919, Shtok's collected short stories were published to mixed reviews. According to literary gossip at the time, she went to the office of one of her critics and slapped him in the face. After that she stopped writing Yiddish short stories and wrote a novel in English, *Only Musicians* (1927), which again tells the tale of a restless young girl, this time caught in an obsessive love for an Italian vaudeville musician. It was a terrible flop and seemingly ended her career as a published writer.

It is only in this recent generation that Jewish feminist scholars and writers began to retrieve Fradel Shtok's long forgotten life and work from obscurity. Although no one as yet has attempted to reconstruct her biography, her life inspired works of fiction, a poem, "Fradel Shtok," by Irena Klepfisz, and my own short story, "What Remains Is Random," (*Lilith*, Fall 1987). Klepfisz's poem has Fradel losing her mind as she wavers between the use of two languages, Yiddish and English:

Think of it: *heym* and *home* the meaning  
the same of course exactly  
but the shift in vowel was the ocean  
in which I drowned.<sup>2</sup>

The heroine in my story, a feminist historian in the early nineteen seventies, searches for the fictitious, talented, Yiddish poet and painter Ada Fletcher, who was incarcerated in the Livingston Manor Institute For Psychiatric Rest many years before. Led on a wild goose chase by two elderly men, Ada's former lover, Amos Starkman, and the sympathetic archivist of the Jewish Radical Literary Society, Agurski, the heroine realizes she will never be able to piece together the Yiddish woman poet's life. "I cried with my feminist sensibility," she says at the end of the story, "and some deep part of me knew I could never rescue Ada from that oblivion into which she had been trapped. Then I thought, gratefully, maybe she has rescued me."

Fradel Shtok and the early generation of Yiddish women writers have still to be rediscovered. Their lives and their works, like a rich archeological site, beckon us with the promise of discoveries into Jewish women's perceptions. Through their words and dreams, we hope to find new understanding in our own hidden feelings and thoughts.

<sup>1</sup>Copyright 1996 by Norma Fain Pratt. Used with permission of the author. Translations from the Yiddish are by the author.

<sup>2</sup>A *Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New* (1971-1990), Eighth Mountain Press, Portland, Org., 1990, p. 228.

## **Feminism, yidishkayt, and Jewish Identity**

*Ester Moskowitz, Chair*

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum

### **JEWISH FEMINISM, SECULARISM, AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY**

In addition to being the rabbi of Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, I served as assistant director of the National Yiddish Book Center before I went to rabbinical school. I'm going to tell you a little bit about my own personal journey, which I think addresses directly the questions of today's session and specifically the question of Yiddish and Jewish secularism, feminism, and religious identity.

How did I get to the National Yiddish Book Center? I had studied Yiddish as a college student at Barnard College (Columbia University). In my senior year, while hitchhiking in the Amherst, Massachusetts, area, I was picked up by the driver of a big van full of boxes of books. I was sitting in the back of the van, and I happened to open up one of the boxes. I noticed that it contained the collected works of Sholom Aleichem, Mendele Moykher Seforim and Y. L. Peretz. I said to the driver of the van, "What are you doing with Yiddish books in Amherst, Massachusetts?" It was inconceivable to me. Well, he slammed on the brakes, turned around, looked at me, and said, "What are you, a hitchhiker, doing, being able to read them?" That driver was, of course, Aaron Lansky, when he was just beginning the Yiddish Book Center. And that began our friendship. The next year I moved to Amherst and worked at the National Yiddish Book Center during the early years of its existence.

Of course, in order to read the books in that box, I had to have studied Yiddish. Although my paternal grandparents spoke only Yiddish, two generations later I was raised without any Yiddish at all.

I was born in the late 1950s after World War II, after the Holocaust, after the founding of the state of Israel. I was raised in the exuberance of an American suburban Jewish culture which felt secure, though some shadows hung over it. We learned about Jewish history, which went from Abraham and Isaac to 1948. Sometime when we were old enough, we would get something about the Holocaust. But in between, the two thousand years in between, were completely glossed over. Glossed? Were skipped entirely.

The Conservative synagogue's three-day-a-week Hebrew school did not yield me a command of the Hebrew language, despite all those years of faithful attendance. In fact, at my entrance exam for the yeshiva high school, I did not even know that verbs were conjugated in Hebrew. I didn't even know how to say the simplest verb in any form other than the infinitive.

That was after eight years of Hebrew school.

The Judaism that I was taught was based largely on the two crutches of American Judaism: the state of Israel and the Holocaust. Soviet Jewry actually came a little bit later. And these two forms of identification with our people formed our Judaism. The Holocaust was brought up at every possible opportunity, whether it was relevant or not. And the state of Israel as well. And I think, like many, I got a little sick of it. I got a little sick of the sentimentality attached to both and, in fact, became immune and a little bit numb to the true power of both.

Despite my weakness in Hebrew, I was admitted to the yeshiva high school in New Jersey, which, I can tell you, is very proud now to have me as its graduate. (They have not yet invited me back as a commencement speaker.) As far as I know, I'm the only one in my graduating class who became a rabbi. Be that as it may, in my yeshiva high school, I discovered a Judaism that I had never experienced before. In this Orthodox world, I discovered not a vicarious Judaism, which defined passion about Jewish things just in terms of Israel or the Holocaust, nor a pediatric Judaism ("We'll go to synagogue because it's good for the children"). Instead, I found an intellectual, adult Judaism where the adults who surrounded me were passionate about Judaism and *yidishkayt* and cared deeply about studying, understanding, and living Judaism. And I fell in love with Orthodoxy. That is, of course, until I discovered feminism.

In my senior year of high school, I woke up to the role of women in this wonderful system that I had become completely enamored with. I started feeling more and more uncomfortable with Orthodoxy as a way of life for me. I had no models for integrating feminism and Orthodoxy. I didn't think it possible. By the end of my senior year in high school, I had rejected Orthodox Judaism because I simply could not reconcile it with my burgeoning feminism, and I went off the Barnard College, where I thought I could escape Orthodox Judaism and the narrow, parochial confines of my yeshiva high school.

Lo and behold, fully one-third of my high school class had enrolled in Barnard or Columbia. It was at Barnard that I completely rejected any kind of religious Judaism. It wasn't until my second year in college, through the study of Yiddish and eastern European Jewish history, that I began to find my way back. Because all of a sudden, I found in Yiddish and in eastern European Jewish history an academic and intellectual approach to Judaism that did not include the Orthodox framework and was as exciting as the Orthodox world, but without the dogma.

One person in particular enabled me to come back to Judaism. That was my professor, Dr. Paula Hyman (who, I am delighted to learn, is here today).

It was in her classes that I discovered an intellectual, vibrant approach to Judaism that I thought I would never again feel or experience. And, she was a feminist! I realized that Judaism and feminism didn't have to be mutually exclusive. As I studied Yiddish intensively, as well as eastern and western European Jewish history, I started to understand that Jewish history was much vaster, much deeper, than the superficial history I had been taught in my Conservative Hebrew school and in my yeshiva high school. I was completely smitten with the effect of understanding our people's stories. I realized that in these stories we could learn more about ourselves than I could have imagined.

Zooming now through the years very quickly: I moved to Amherst, I worked at the National Yiddish Book Center, and I discovered and lived a very exciting secular Yiddish life. I became completely involved with the Yiddishists and the Yiddish world that existed and was growing at the time, and still continues to grow among people like myself, disaffected young Jews who were fleeing suburban Jewish culture, trying hard to find a more meaningful, richer Jewish life. In the study of eastern European Jewish culture we found a culture that was not dependent on either Israel or the Holocaust, because neither existed then. We found a Jewish culture that was rich and vibrant without those two crutches and that enriched people's lives on a daily basis.

In my years at the Yiddish Book Center, I started teaching lots of different courses and slowly began discovering that in order to teach the simplest course on Peretz in English translation I had to teach basic Judaism. It gradually became clear to me it was simply impossible to understand Peretz if you don't understand what *shabes* is. It's very hard to understand what Sholom Aleichem's metaphors and imagery mean if you don't understand what *kashres* is. Many of the classes in Yiddish literature had to bring people up to speed on basic Jewish concepts because even though Peretz and Sholom Aleichem and Mendele Mokher Seforim did not have a religious Jewish identity, they knew that the audience to which they were speaking would understand what a *shaleshudes* was, what a *melave malke* was, what the basic Jewish concepts were; and they understood that Hebrew was an integral part of the Jewish identity, not something to be rejected.

I started feeling uncomfortable. I discovered something that disturbed me and continues to disturb me about some of the focus on Yiddish and Yiddish culture that was developing: The attraction to eastern European culture, which did not rely on the Holocaust and Israel, was for some people a way to avoid confronting those two pieces of Jewish identity altogether. Frankly, I believe that in 1995 we as Jews cannot ignore those two very critical parts of our history and culture. Jewish feminism has to be deeper than simply saying that



Hebrew is a male, militaristic language, Yiddish is a female, antimilitaristic language. Although there are elements of truth and some real insights in that categorization, it is not enough to simply make what I see as a false dichotomy. And now, having spent many years studying Hebrew, I understand not only the beauty of Hebrew, but the importance of knowing Hebrew in order to deeply understand the Yiddish world and the Yiddish language itself.

So when I was at the National Yiddish Book Center my house slowly became a kind of center for *shabes* dinners and *pesakh sederim*. I started to realize that for me, a focus on Yiddish alone was not enough. I needed to understand the Hebraic part of what Max Weinreich would call our "internal bilingualism." I needed to understand the religious piece of who we were, because even though the Peretz and Sholom Aleichem crowd of the eastern European world did not live within a religious community anymore, what surrounded them in eastern Europe was a dynamic, diverse Jewish community to which they were responding, often arguing, going back and forth. But I think that today, to talk about a Yiddish secular culture that is not in dialogue and in close relationship with *yidishkayt* and with Judaism, with the roots and the sources of who we are, will be a very difficult Yiddish Judaism to pass on to the next generation. It becomes a very difficult Judaism to live day to day. I say this as a passionate lover of Yiddish, a passionate student of Yiddish culture, literature, and language. I am deeply committed as well to seeing this revival of Yiddish among a younger generation succeed. It should flourish in the synagogues and the JCCs, not just in the Yiddish organizations.

But I reject any kind of dichotomy between Yiddish secularism and Jewish religious identity. And of course, I don't define religious identity by Orthodoxy. We should not allow the right wing of our community to steal the language of our religion. We should not allow the right wing to be the only ones to say, "I am a religious Jew." We should not allow the right wing to say, "This is kosher, and this is *treyf*." I believe we need to use that language to argue about our religion, to explore it, to struggle with it, because if we abdicate all that imagery, if we abdicate all that resonates when we talk about Jewish religious identity, we will end up with a rather empty culture.

When I think about these issues I am reminded of what happened in the Soviet Union after the revolution, in the late 1920s. I'm sure many of you here know this, but I bring this into our discussion to paint a very stark picture of what a Yiddish devoid of Judaism would mean. Hebrew was outlawed in the Soviet Union, and Jewish religious practice was outlawed. Yiddish was allowed to flourish—up to certain point:

Laws were passed to de-Hebraize Yiddish, forbidding the use of Hebrew spelling in Yiddish. Yiddish has two different orthographies, or spelling systems: One system is for words that come from the Hebrew and thus are related to our history and tradition beyond the eastern European experience. Those words preserve the Hebrew spelling. So *shabes* is spelled *shin bet sof*, as it is in Hebrew. All words that come from any other source, such as those of Slavic or Germanic origin, are spelled phonetically. But under the de-Hebraizing law, a word like *shabes* no longer was to be spelled in the Hebrew way but was to be spelled strictly phonetically: *shin aleph bet ayin samekh*. The word *emes* ("truth")—*aleph mem tet*—was to be spelled *ayin mem ayin samekh*. Because Hebrew meant reactionary religion, all words that had any Hebrew relationship were completely removed so as to make Yiddish a purely secular, revolutionary language.

The law required Jews to remove the holy language—*loshn-koydesh*—from their Yiddish language. I don't think any of us could argue that that was a good thing to do because Yiddish and Yiddish culture maintained within themselves, even while arguing against it, a deep religious sensibility that is connected to daily life. (And again, by religious, I don't mean right wing; I don't mean Orthodox. I mean the traditions that carry on a sense of connectedness to our ancestors that goes even beyond eastern Europe as our source.)

Eastern Europe is one chapter, a very long, very majestic, and culturally rich chapter, in our lives as a Jewish people. But it is only one chapter. It is not the beginning of who we are as Jews. We who are American Jews descended from eastern Europe need to study Yiddish, need to study Yiddish literature to understand who we are. I also think people should study Aramaic, the language of the *gemara*. There is an essential part of Jewish culture (not the whole picture, but another piece of it) that is accessible only through Aramaic.

So where does that leave us? Well, I hope this is controversial, I hope that people care to argue with me, and I also hope that we have risen beyond the level of saying that we need one or the other, that it's either Yiddish secularism or Jewish religious identity, that it's either feminism or Jewish religious identity. That was a struggle people fought in the early 1970s. It was groups here at the seminary and around the Conservative movement, like *Ezrat Nashim*, the Jewish feminist group of the Conservative movement, that insisted women should be part of the process of creating a Judaism that will reflect Jewish women's lives.

After three wonderful years at the National Yiddish Book Center I realized that my study of Judaism outside of the academic world had stopped in my teens and that as an adult, I deserved, and my people—the Jewish people—deserved of me that I give

credit and attention to the traditions of Judaism that actually go beyond the eastern European experience.

I went to rabbinical school not knowing what I would do afterward, but in an attempt to ask questions within a community of adults that would respect the feminist concerns I had, the gay and lesbian concerns I had, and would be willing to say, This is a Judaism that is big enough for the most difficult questions, the most difficult challenges. In fact, if we want to take part in creating a Judaism that is worthy of handing on to another generation, it can only be the kind that responds to the most difficult questions, not with simple responses and not with facile responses, but with a sense of depth: depth of history, depth of courage, and yes, I absolutely also believe, depth of religious identity.

NOTE: I am deeply grateful to Aaron Lansky, who taught me so much.

Clare Kinberg

**BRIKN TSU DER TSUKUNFT/BRIDGES TO THE FUTURE:  
PUBLISHING YIDDISH FOR FEMINIST ACTIVISTS**

Around 1985 I made the self-discovery that there were only two places in which I felt really comfortably at home: among a small group of lesbian feminist activists and friends and in-turn-of-the-century Vilna. My everyday life in the late 1970s and early 1980s was a passionate frenzy of grass-roots organizing to stop the closure of public hospitals, expose corruption in land developers and city government, set up shelters for battered women, keep a feminist bookstore open and create more visibility and safety for lesbians, stop union busting and attacks on affirmative action and welfare recipients, and work against racism in public and private spheres.

In my intellectual and spiritual life, however, I was living through the founding of the Bund in 1897, hammering out policy on Jewish national cultural autonomy, and arguing with Lenin, Emma Goldman, and Rosa Luxembourg about the best ways forward. Through reading biographies, I was immersed in the lives of Bernard Lazare, Ber Borochov, Vladimir Medem, Abraham Cahan, and Simon Dubnow; the political organizing then current in my life was framed by the political perspectives of Jewish socialist activists from prior generations. The inspiration and the relevance, the connection I felt between their lives and mine was a spiritual epiphany for me, a homecoming, a warm embrace.

My passion for seeking just solutions to social and political injustices in the world is part of a Jewish continuum. I am an heir to a complex strand in Jewish civilization. This is my solid ground and has given me space to soar. It is, I think, an inexhaustible well of insights based on experience, a confirmation that there

is meaning in living. I have come to believe that I can participate in creating meaning and honor by learning about the lives of Jews who lived before me, that I can pass on the possibility of such honor through my own actions when they are informed by the lives of Jews from past generations.

The past is the thorny, yet central source of my identity and politics as a Jewish woman. In essential ways, it is the Jewish collective past—three thousand years of history and storytelling—which creates Jews as a people and which constitutes, for each of us, our personal heritage.

Looking to the Jewish past for meaning, identity, and purpose is complicated for Jewish women, however, because so much of Jewish women's past has been hidden or unexplored. In order to find women's lives, I have found it very helpful to think about the Jewish past in new ways, particularly ways that will give me openings to Jewish women's lives beyond the matriarchs in the religious texts. I wanted to conceive of a way to look at Jewish history that would include even the lives of those who by *religious* definitions might have been completely excluded from consideration. The writings of Mordechai Kaplan about Judaism as a religious *civilization* have helped me to conceptualize the Jewish heritage in a way that reduces the religious heritage to an influential corner. I form this model in my mind not with the purpose of diminishing religious influences on Jewish life, but rather to refocus the lens, to bring into bold relief other aspects of Jewish life.

When I refocus the lens away from the religious structures and influences, I can see that the vast majority of the Jewish heritage, for me, consists of the lives Jews have led: family and community life, the lands in which we have lived, our relationships to other peoples and landscapes, and our political and social struggles: what we ate, thought, and aspired to.

Shrinking the jurisdiction of religious Judaism lets me see more clearly how the religious texts were primarily written and read by men who, for over two thousand years, attempted to enforce ways to be in the world based on almost exclusively male perspectives. They cannot and did not encompass the thoughts and activities of women. We must look elsewhere for that part of our heritage. If we rely on religious texts and constructs in our study of Jewish heritage, we may not find the Jewish women whose struggles most relate to our own. Many women and men who were defined out of the Jewish people by religious construction of Jewish identity, were nonetheless Jews dealing with many things that directly relate to our contemporary feminist struggles. For information about these Jews we must focus our interest outside of religious texts.

The religious heritage is ours, too, and Jewish



feminists will contribute to it and change it for future generations. However, I am convinced that in order for women's contributions to fundamentally reshape our heritage, it is necessary to conceptualize Jewish life outside of and without the religion. This is not a new idea, just one that has become more and more marginalized in recent decades. The historians Nora Levin and Simon Dubnow opened a window for me onto the fertile process of reconceptualizing Jewish definition and identity during the hundred years before the Holocaust. Levin's chronicle of the development of Jewish socialists, of the socialist Zionists, and of Jews in the U.S. labor movement was a critical work for me to begin to understand my own heritage. Levin took the title of her book about Jewish socialists, *While Messiah Tarried*, from Maimonides' twelfth principle ("I firmly believe in the coming of the Messiah and though he may tarry I daily wait for his coming"), which religious Jews using a traditional prayer book recite every morning. I've always loved the title of this book because without rejecting religious belief, it basically implies how beside the point it was for Jews who wanted to bring justice into the world. Yes, without knowledge of religious beliefs and practices, the full resonance of Levin's title, *While Messiah Tarried*, is lost. But knowledge of Maimonides without knowledge of Jews taking their beliefs into the streets denies us essential lessons that are ours as Jews to bring into our work today in the world as feminist activists.

Though changing views emerging at the turn of the century about Jewish identity and peoplehood were not primarily motivated by feminist concerns, they opened the way for women's participation in ways that religious definitions did not. This ferment in Jewish self-definition was halted by the Nazis, and, I think, the destruction so stuns each generation as we learn of it (there have been two now) that we can barely face anything that happened before 1933.

To cope and find our footholds, many Jewish women of my generation have focused on our grandmothers—sometimes idolizing them with an almost childlike affection—and embraced nostalgia for a mythical Jewish world that we would like to believe existed before the Nazi nightmare, but which in reality we know very little about. Many Jewish women have given up on finding meaning in Jewish life. Given the choice, as they perceive it, between feminist or social justice activism in the world on the one hand, and Judaism on the other, they don't choose Judaism. And most women who do choose Judaism and feminism have abandoned time altogether and immersed themselves in traditional Jewish texts producing fascinating and constructive work that is still, in my opinion, constricted by the (ancient, male) writings themselves and women's insecure and vacillating relationship to them.

Yet despite the barriers created by sexism and anti-Semitism, I believe we must learn much more about how and why Jewish women and men, for decades before the Holocaust, struggled to break free of rabbinic Judaism and to create Jewish lives outside of the religious tradition. Without knowledge of their struggles, Jewish feminist attempts to change Jewish religion and fully participate in the creation of Jewish culture are like swimming upstream, our senses and movement severely encumbered. For our future, we must conceive of Jewish life without being dependent on nostalgia for a sense of history, or the ancient and rabbinical texts for ground or authority. And we must learn much more about the real lives of the women who lived and struggled with and along side of Medem and Cahan, Dubnow, and Borokhov.

One essential way for us to do this is to read the writings of women who wrote in Yiddish. We need to read them in Yiddish if we can. Those who can translate into English must make this a priority, and those of us, like myself, who have the privilege of publishing need to make a priority of publishing the thoughts, experiences, and visions of Jewish women from our recent past.

Jewish feminists face urgent political questions: Who are we, and what are we doing in our own communities? Who are our political allies? How does our Jewish identity affect our political activism for social justice? What political lessons can we learn from the past? How do we participate as Jews in the multi-ethnic feminist movement? The questions are urgent. However, though they were framed in different words and in different languages, we are not the first to have asked them.

*Bridges'* unique commitment to publishing archival women's writing in Yiddish is an effort to connect with and learn from the lives of Jewish women writers and activists of prior generations: their choices, their nuances of political affiliation, their experiences and insights on family, nation, ethics, and religion. Contemporary Yiddish writing, too, connects us in a complex way with the past. Women writing in Yiddish today are linking themselves to a specific strand of our Jewish heritage. Fundamentally, telling stories and writing about political values in Yiddish was about writing in the language that women, working people, ordinary eastern European Jews could and did read. Now, of course, that is not the case. But my point is that for Jewish women today who want to connect themselves to a Jewish literary tradition that was intensely focused on our own people—writing that valued its Jewish audience—and at the same time was "international" or, as today's lingo would have it, "multicultural," we need to know and read the writing of women who wrote in Yiddish over the past century. These works have to be available to contemporary feminist activists.

Publishing, or rather in most cases, republishing women's writing in Yiddish also connects us to a well-used vehicle for change within Jewish culture. For the past two hundred years periodicals have had significant impact, even caused minor revolutions in Jewish culture and history, even when they published only one or two issues. Periodicals in Yiddish and in Hebrew were founded to react to current events, to help form Jewish public opinion, and were often where the landmarks of Jewish literature first found audiences. By publishing work that focuses on women's lives and viewpoints, these perspectives are brought into the vortex of Jewish cultural creativity. But in order to have a real impact, the writing must stay accessible, it must be known and referred to, and it must be re-examined by new generations in the light of new experiences and new relationships. This is why we must delve into the archives of Yiddish women's writing, give it serious consideration, respond to it, and publish what we have discovered.

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Irena Klepfisz

#### SECULAR YIDISHKAYT AND FEMINIST SECULAR IDENTITY<sup>1</sup>

I am pleased to be speaking with Clare Kinberg and Sharon Kleinbaum. Clare and I have worked on various projects related to *Bridges* and on other political activities and have frequently discussed Jewish secularism. Though Sharon and I have known each other for a long time, we've never had an in-depth discussion about our differences. This is a good opportunity.

I met Sharon in the early 1980s, when she was working with the National Yiddish Book Center. Sharon contacted me at a time when I was already interested in, but had little information about, women and Yiddish. The first time I visited the Center, Sharon showed me a bookcase with a number of well-stocked shelves in which she was placing all books by women authors. Since I had barely heard of any women writers, I was stunned. I relate this because I think Sharon was among the many women who, through imperceptible, evolutionary ways, enabled *Bridges* magazine to begin publishing Yiddish women writers and made *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, the first such anthology, a reality.

A major frustration inherent in most dialogues about Jewish secular and religious identity and Jewish continuity is that secularists are forced to address misperceptions and distortions about the nature and meaning of Jewish secularism. Instead of talking substance (for example, how to ensure the survival of secular Jewish identity) we are forced to take time to challenge assumptions and answer charges and innuendoes.

Today is no exception. In her talk Sharon argued in part that Jewish secularism was ineffective and

"unJewish" (my term) because it is linked to Evseksiia, the Jewish Section of the Communist party of the former Soviet Union. But *Jewish secularism is not*, nor has it ever been, *monolithic* and, historically, the Evseksiia promoted but one extreme form of Jewish secularism. Jewish secularism has always had many strands, and there has been as much in-fighting and disagreement among secularists about how to lead a Jewish secular life as there has been among Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Jews about how to lead an observant Jewish life. And just as Sharon, an observant Jew and rabbi, wants people to refrain from assuming she is a supporter of the JDL, I would like her to refrain from assuming all secular Jews are or were supporters of Evseksiia. This smacks of red baiting and, though I cannot imagine this was Sharon's intent, I think we need to be careful about how we debate this issue.

In reality, the secularism promoted by Evseksiia had little to do with the secularist-Yiddishist movements which shaped Yiddish literature and culture and forged the secular European and North and South American Jewish communities between the two world wars. Socialist, Bundist, and anarchist secularisms differed greatly from Soviet secularism (if we can call it that) in their politics and attitudes to Hebrew and religion, anti-Semitism and Zionism.

For example, the specific secularism which I grew up with gave me a basic understanding of Jewish religious texts and practices. We celebrated (rather than observed) many Jewish *yom toyvim*/holidays. Some *yom toyvim* were designated "synagogue holidays" and played no part in our calendar. But others, like *hanuka*, *purim*, and *pesakh* with their historical and political overtones, were considered very important. We prepared *sedorim*/seders and read from Yiddish *hagodes*; these included excerpts from Yehoash's Biblical Yiddish translations and incorporated writings about post-Biblical and modern Jewish history. My Jewish education took place in an afternoon Yiddish *folkschule* and a weekend *mitl-shul*/high school, where I studied Yiddish literature in the original and read from a three-volume Yiddish history which began with Abraham and ended with the *haskole* and the modern period. And, yes, Hebrew was also part of the curriculum—first, just the *loshn-koydesh* element of Yiddish and later, in *mitl-shul*, the language itself. Still, the primary focus always remained Yiddish, and through my *shules* I developed a deep love for *veltlekhe yidishkayt*/secular Jewishness, Yiddish culture, and Jewish history, and an unwavering commitment to share and shape the history of the Jewish people.

If you think mine was not a "purely" secularist upbringing because it contained too much Jewish content, then you are erroneously equating secularism

with assimilation. But the two are very different. A Jew who is philosophically an assimilationist—due to self-hate or because of political, social, or economic reasons—wants to divest herself of all Jewish connections—religious, cultural, linguistic, social—in order to blend into mainstream gentile society. But a philosophically secularist Jew aims to strengthen her connection to the Jewish people; she wants to maintain her rootedness in Jewish history, culture, and language. She differs from the observant Jew in that she views the Bible as neither sacred nor central to her Jewishness and does not feel bound by Jewish law (*halakha*) and religious practice. But she *does* recognize the Bible as a repository of ancient Jewish history and literature which she must understand in the same way that she feels obligated to understand all Jewish history and culture.

In short, Jewish secularism is not an absence or a void and a secularist is not simply a Jew without religion. Rather, Jewish secularism demands that secularists be educated and knowledgeable about Jewish history, for only then can they fully experience their own Jewishness and act in the best interest of other Jews and other peoples. In the end, to be a secular Jew requires as much discipline and education as it does to be an observant Jew.

Given that, why is there so much hostility to Jewish secularism from the observant community? Why is there always talk—implicit and explicit—that by claiming our right to Jewish secular identity, we are somehow divisive? Most of the hostility is historical, with roots in the *haskole* movements in western and eastern Europe. Those early secularists *were* adversarial because they rightfully saw the religious establishment as monopolizing power in the Jewish community. But our situation is quite different, and the observant stance that secularism is a threat is anachronistic. Like me, many secularists were born into a secularist Jewish environment and never experienced tensions with the observant community; others simply moved away from the observance of their childhood; still others never experienced any religious practice because their parents were assimilated. Whatever the reasons, these Jews are not drawn to the synagogue or to observance and, for them, neither has resonance and neither is central to Jewish identity.

Yet despite this reality, observant Jews still tell secularists to join synagogues, to support religious institutions, and even to have faith, as if this were an act of will. As Sharon put it, we should come under one roof and “ask grown-up questions” about texts and practices with which we are not engaged emotionally. There is something not only condescending in this (for it treats secularists as children), but also very closed. A position such as Sharon’s makes no

allowance for a legitimate way of identifying outside of the prescribed formula. In short, no matter what we feel, no matter what we believe intellectually, we are told to feel something else, to abandon our principles. I can’t tell you how frequently I hear this.

The charge of divisiveness is one to which members of any minority are always sensitive. Yet, I believe that Jewish secularism is not a threat to the larger Jewish community, but rather our hope for Jewish survival in this country. If the organized Jewish community is truly concerned about assimilation, then it needs to really start helping those Jews who are committed to maintaining their Jewishness outside of established religious institutions by supporting them *in ways they want to be supported*. The observant community needs to understand that our lack of religious feeling does not mean that we are empty as Jews or disrespectful of observance. It simply means we do not want to be observant Jews. And we would like the same courtesy extended to us—informed respect—as observant Jews want extended to them.

In the last decade or so, Jews in the United States have been struggling to be included in multicultural events and institutions. Yet we seem to abandon the concept when we speak about the Jewish community itself. Jews have always been a diverse people—in their religious practice, in their languages, etc.—and this has provided a unique natural multiculturalism within our international Jewish community. Yet today there seems to be a fear of this diversity, as if it would weaken us. I believe it is our strength, for it enables us to come to grips with the meaning of difference and to learn how we can simultaneously have unity and diversity. Clearly, as secularists we have no other choice. We have to be who we are. And it would be a tremendous loss if our Jewish diversity were stifled, if the definition of Jewishness were limited to a single observant way of life. Instead of being hostile to secularism, the larger community should be nurturing it, validating it. But if it fails to do this, if our options for Jewish expression remain severely limited, I believe that the majority of the Jews in this country will disappear into the U.S. mainstream.

But hostility to secularism is not uniquely Jewish. I have been discussing Jewish secularism over the past fifteen years, but I have never experienced the issue so intensely as in recent years. Today, in this country, whether people realize it or not, we are engaged in a major struggle about secularism. We are debating whether the United States is a religious country or a secular country; whether atheism is acceptable; whether it is imperative to belong to a religious institution. This debate is propelled by the fundamentalist right, which questions the legitimacy and acceptability of the “areligious” life: secularism.

Jews have not remained untouched by this discussion. Though the debate about Jewish secularism is quite old, it has recently acquired a new edge. I find myself repeatedly challenged about my moral base, my aesthetic sensibility, my lack of "spirituality." People ask me: "When you look at the stars, or you walk in the woods, can you appreciate them?" "I'm a poet," I tell them. "What do you mean, can I appreciate them?" Why, I keep wondering, should a secularist not appreciate nature? Why should a secularist not feel deeply? What is it that makes people think that religion is the only source of these feelings? Is there no possibility for moral action *outside* of religion? Are secularists automatically amoral because they don't attend synagogue or look for guidance from the Bible? Is it only religious texts which teach that oppression of another people is wrong, that keeping a people homeless is wrong?

Unfortunately, many people respond that secularists *do* lack a moral center and a "higher" vision of life or, to put it another way, that secularists are incomplete and inadequate. They deny that secularists can find a moral basis for action in intellectual and political thought, in common sense, in compassion, and in justice. Jewish secularists are facing the same accusations.<sup>2</sup>

But I want to refocus. This is, after all, a conference about women and I want to discuss the intersection of feminism and secularism. Certainly one thing that secular and observant women have in common is the need to reclaim and reform their individual Jewish heritages. I was surprised to hear Sharon say that we can't really understand Yiddish literature without knowing Hebrew and religious texts. In other words, we can't even be good Yiddishists without religion and Hebrew.

In the sense that we need to be well-informed readers, her statement has some merit, though, as I have argued, being religiously informed and being a member of a congregation are two very different things. Yet, basically, I think Sharon's statement is wrong. It is true that the literary work of Mendele, especially, but also of Peretz and Sholem Aleichem is filled with *loshn-koydesh* and Biblical and Talmudic allusions. These *klasiker* were all male writers with a traditional male education and, as a result, a certain aspect of their writings was—and probably remains today—accessible predominantly to male readers. But Yiddish women's literature is different. With few exceptions, it contains very little *loshn-koydesh* and virtually no references to religious texts. The major exception is the work of Kadya Molodowsky who, among all the Yiddish women writers, was the only one to attend a Jewish institution of higher learning, Warsaw's Hebrew Teachers Seminary. Her writing reflects this background. Though many women writers attended a girl's *kheder* or were tutored privately,

their Jewish education rarely continued beyond the age of 10 and their Yiddish reflects this.

So when someone refers to the centrality of religious texts and of Hebrew in Yiddish literature, I am, therefore, forced to ask, Which Yiddish literature? and, central to whom? And the answer is, of course, Educated men's Yiddish literature, and central to educated men. And I don't put that down because I happen to love the writings of the *klasiker*. But it took me decades to realize that theirs was not the only Yiddish literature and that the canon was incomplete.

I realize in pointing to this linguistic characteristic of Yiddish women's writing that some people will say it is impoverished. But is it? Or is it just different? Does women's creative output lack something? Or does it have a different starting point and perspective? And are these not the same questions that we've raised regarding secularism? Because something is not like something else—does that mean it is less?

I think in relationship to Yiddish literature, critics have mistaken the part (male writing) for the whole (all of Yiddish literature).<sup>3</sup> Feminists are now re-examining the assumptions with which we read classic Yiddish literature and a virtually unquestioned canon.

So secular feminists face the same problems as their observant sisters. We too have been excluded from our tradition. I had a secular education and I was raised in the Bund, but fifteen years ago I did not know of a single Yiddish woman writer or activist leader. I had to discover them for myself by reading *Doyres bundistn*/Generations of Bundists and the books in Sharon's special bookcase. I had to search for my secular women's heritage, a heritage which belongs not only to all Jewish women including the observant, but to the entire community.

Secular and observant women have common problems and can be mutually supportive. I want to emphasize again that it's important for us to develop Jewish secularism(s) precisely because the synagogue is not drawing many of us. This should not be seen as a failure, but rather as the reality of this moment in history. I hope that we do not lose Jews to assimilation because the segments of the community with power and resources gave in to their prejudices and refused to see in Jewish secularism new opportunities for Jewish continuity.

I want to answer two other common questions. Sharon observed that we cannot reproduce the secular *yidishkayt* which existed in the major eastern European cities and in certain communities in the United States and that, therefore, Jewish secularism has no future. She is right, of course, in her observation, but not in her conclusion. The aim of contemporary Jewish secularists is not to reproduce a former way of life which flourished in a different social context and in a different historical period. Rather, we

must find our own way and build our own institutions to meet our special needs independent of the synagogue. I suspect the common language among secularists will be English and that our secularism will draw not only from Yiddish culture (in translation), but also from other Jewish cultures with which many of us are far more familiar than were previous generations. I foresee that we will also incorporate the cultures of non-Jewish allies with whom we have forged meaningful social and political ties. The secularism of a previous generation serves us best when it informs our actions, not when it commands as a rigid model.

Some see this discussion as abstract. But secular Jews tend to become aware of its reality when it is already too late: when their children are ready for school. These parents would like to provide their children with a strong secular Jewish education, but there are almost no schools to send them to, and so they frequently resort to sending their children to Jewish schools whose philosophies they really don't embrace.

For secular Jews this represents an enormous void, one, however, which should not intimidate us. I want to remind everyone that not a single institution Clare or Sharon or I are involved in today existed twenty-five years ago—not *Bridges*, not Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, not *Found Treasures*, not this conference, all of which are now taken for granted. The fact that we have lesbian rabbis and cantors and women's *tefilah* groups should encourage us. Establishing a new secular school system is a major undertaking. But as women and lesbians we have made enormous progress and have achieved major changes. I don't think this particular goal—the building of secular institutions—is any more difficult than anything else we've done so far.

So let me end by affirming my belief that it is important for feminists to continue the dialogue about secularism and observance and that, instead of trying to blur or erase or misrepresent our differences, we begin being mutually supportive of each other. We should never assume when a woman claims a certain identity that we know everything about her. On this Sharon and I agree. If a woman tells me she's observant, I should not assume anything. She may keep a kosher home, but feel no restrictions outside; she may be *shomer shabes*/Sabbath observing. And when a woman says she's a secularist, we should assume there are many meanings to this term and be open to hearing who this woman is. There are secularists who will mix many kinds of "spiritual" or observant elements into their secularism; some fewer and some none at all. I think that's good, for diversity and variety create a very interesting mixture and enable us to express our Jewishness most truthfully. Thank you.

<sup>1</sup>The text incorporates some of the discussion that took place during the question-and-answer period.

<sup>2</sup>This issue is, of course, far keener in Israel, which remains a theocracy. Since the election of Benjamin Netanyahu with his strong ties to religious parties, the issue of secularism will undoubtedly move to the forefront of current debate.

<sup>3</sup>But the use of *loshn-koydesh* and religious allusion is not simply a gender issue but also a class issue. The Yiddish of the well-known male sweatshop poets is very much like the Yiddish of women writers. In other words, the knowledge of religious texts was/is, for the most part, acquired by men through religious practice in the synagogue and through study—if the parents could afford it.

## Women and Yiddish Theater

Nahama Sandrow, Chair

Edna Nahshon

### WHAT WAS AND WHAT WAS NOT: WOMEN AND THE RADICAL YIDDISH THEATER

The Communist Jewish camp in America placed great emphasis on the cultural arena. The reason was both practical and ideological. The Communists believed that workers' consciousness could be raised by attending and participating in cultural activities. They also insisted that high-caliber art was not the exclusive property of the bourgeoisie and that *shund* (trashy, popular literature) was the antithesis of proletarian art. The beautiful, the sophisticated, and the refined were the legitimate property of the working class. Consequently, the cultural activity that took place within the Jewish Communist counterculture in America is most impressive not only in its volume and profusion, but also in terms of the religious-like devotion with which it was undertaken. Cultural activities took place at various locales ranging from summer camps and workers' clubs to Madison Square Garden and Carnegie Hall. The theatrical sphere was particularly vivid: Virtually every party-affiliated organization sponsored a dramatic club, notably the IWO (International Workers' Order) and adult camps, such as Nitgedayget. The movement's publications, especially the daily *Freiheit* and the monthly *Hammer* devoted considerable attention to the theater, both Yiddish and English, and to theoretical discussions concerning the radical stage, both at home and abroad.

The jewel in the crown of the radical camp's dramatic activities was the Artef Theatre, whose name was the acronym of Arbeter teater farband, or Workers' Theatrical Alliance. Artef was to become one of the most artistically prominent theatrical organizations in the history of the American Yiddish stage, and by the mid-1930s, it had also gained unanimous recognition as one of the foremost companies of the American theater of social consciousness.

Artef was initially founded in December 1925 by



left-wing activists representing a large number of social, cultural, and labor organizations that were affiliated with the radical Jewish left. Artef, which began its life as a sort of lobbying and propaganda organization, was assigned by its founders the dual task of promoting the concept of a Yiddish workers' theater in America and of taking practical steps toward the actual establishment of such a theater. The role of this future proletarian theater, it was festively proclaimed, would be "to dramatize the life of Jewish American workers" and to "take an active part in their revolutionary struggle."

In 1926 the Artef organization adopted a fledgling amateur group, the *Freiheit* dramatishe studye (Freedom drama studio). The Studio had been established a year earlier by young radical workers who had been greatly influenced by articles that had been published by the *Freiheit* concerning the importance of proletarian theater. On December 16, 1928, after three years of rigorous theatrical studies, the Studio officially opened its doors as the Artef Theatre Company with a production of *Baym toyer* (At the gate), by Beinush Shteyman.

Artef developed a permanent ensemble of nearly thirty Studio-trained actors who gradually shifted to professional status by the latter half of the 1930s. In 1934 the company moved to its own Broadway house. It continued to perform regularly until early February 1940, with the exception of one season's hiatus during 1938-39.

All told, Artef presented 23 major productions of full-length plays as well as dozens of skits and other concert material prepared for special occasions. Its most notable productions were *Rekrutn* (Recruits, 1934), Lipe Reznik's adaptation of Israel Aksenfeld's original; *200,000* (1936), by Sholem Aleichem; and *Boytse gazlen* (The outlaw, 1937), by Moyshe Kulbak.

Artef was a unique phenomenon in New York's Yiddish theater world. From its very outset, the company disassociated itself ideologically, artistically, and socially from the commercial Yiddish rialto and rejected the star system that governed both the Yiddish and the American stages.

The shining ideal of Artef was the postrevolutionary Russian stage, which was seething with innovative experiments that made it the mecca of the modern theater during the 1920s and early 1930s. The style and ethos of Artef were in many ways similar to those of the two great Jewish theaters that came into being in Moscow in the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution: Goset, the Moscow Yiddish State Theater, and Habimah, the Hebrew-language theater. The allusion to Habimah is particularly pertinent since Benno Schneider, the artistic director of Artef, who shaped the company's unique style, had received his own theatrical education as a young Habimah member. Schneider made his directorial debut in 1930 when he

directed Sholem Aleichem's *Ristokratn* (Aristocrats) for Artef. The production displayed many of the elements that became associated with the Artef style: graphic plasticity, exaggeration and stylization of details, imaginative use of colors, shapes, movement, a strong rhythmic quality, and plenty of music and dance. Artef productions were also praised for their carefully choreographed mass scenes and their emphasis on ensemble acting.

How did women fare in this theater? Let us consider the beginning. The Studio was originally organized by young workers affiliated with the left wing of the Jewish labor movement. The seven founders were all in their twenties, had recently arrived in America, and had met at a short-lived dramatic club that was called the *Freiheit* dramatishe sektsye (Freedom drama section). Of these seven founders, five were men and two were women. The women's bios, as written by them for the 1937 jubilee book *Tsen yor artef* (Ten years of Artef) allow us a glimpse at their lives.

Feigl Lerman was born in 1906, in Vohlin, Ukraine. Her father was a small retailer. In her bio, she wrote that she received a religious education and noted that, unlike many other girls, she had attended school. Once she began to work, she continued her education and attended evening courses for adults. Lerman came to America in 1922 and began to work in a shop that manufactured ladies' dresses. She joined the Communist Industrial Union and learned English at night school. In 1923 she joined a literature and drama club that eventually led her to Artef. Her quest for education continued, and between 1933 and 1935, on her free evenings, she attended courses in Marxism at the Workers' University.

Chana Shpiner was born on May 15, 1905, in Trostinetz, Podolia, in southwestern Russia. Her father was a worker at a sugar factory. Her two brothers were carpenters, and her three sisters worked as seamstresses. In her bio, Chana did not mention her mother, an omission of many, though not all, of the bios prepared for the book. When Chana was a year and a half old, her father died. When the girl turned eight years old, she was apprenticed to a seamstress and worked for two years without pay. She began to work in a shop where she later proceeded to organize a union. Chana learned how to read and write and eventually joined a drama club in her hometown. She came to America, presumably sometime in the early 1920s, and first settled in Newark, New Jersey, where she also joined a dramatic club. During the many years she was a member of the Artef acting collective, Chana continued her work as a seamstress and joined the Needle Trades Industrial Union. In 1937, when she wrote her autobiography, she was a member of Local 9 of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union.

As mentioned earlier, the women's biographies



are very similar to those of their five male peers (with the exception of one who was six years older and who had come to America in 1922 after an unhappy stay in Palestine). Despite the similarities in backgrounds, one notices an interesting phenomenon: As Artef developed and grew, four of the five male founders filled important administrative positions in the organization. Moishe Friedman became the treasurer of the Freiheit Studio, later its general secretary and eventually a member of the Artef Managing Council and of its Artistic Board. He also served for three years as the general secretary of Artef. Abraham Hirshbein became the stage manager for numerous productions. In 1931 he directed *Waterboy*, one of the Artef skits. He served for two years as secretary of the actors' collective, and spent two years on the Artistic Board as well as six years on the Managing Council. In 1937, he became the treasurer of Artef.

The other three men, Roitman, Shtrauss, and Holtz, had left Artef before 1937 and their biographies are not as clear. Shtrauss, however, served as treasurer and secretary general of the Studio Collective and later filled some central administrative positions within the organization. It should also be noted that three of the five men contributed written material (other than the bios) to the two jubilee publications of the company that appeared in 1927 and 1937.

The women did none of the above. They were members of the collective, they played their various dramatic parts, but they took no direct part in the power structure of the organization. One may speculate and say that the latter may have been the individual choices of Lerman and Shpiner, who perhaps had no interest in management. The fact is, however, that practically none of the women members of the Artef collective ever held important administrative positions in the organization. Indeed, Artef was clearly a male bastion since its very inception. In the 1930s, the various Studio teachers and coaches were men, with the exception of the dance instructor, Lilian Shapero. The directors, likewise, were all male: The director of the first production, *Baym toyer*, was Jacob Mestel. The second production, *Naftuli Botwin*, was directed by Em Jo Basshe. Beginning with the third production, *Ristokatn* (Aristocrats), Benno Schneider took over the job. In the late 1930s, when Schneider began to take directorial work outside Artef, the guest directors were again all male. They included Joseph Buloff, Mark Schweid, Raikin Ben-Ari, and Sam Ward. The situation repeated itself in the areas of set design, most of it done by Moi Zolotaroff, and of musical arrangements. The only production element that was largely, though not exclusively, in female hands was that of dance, and included Sophie Berenson, Edith Segal, Lilian Shapero, and Lily Mailman.

What else did the women do? The women were the actresses, that quintessential female presence in our Western theatrical tradition. But even in this role, the numbers are surprising: Of the 29 members of the actors' collective listed in *Tsen yor artef*, 22 were men, seven were women. How, one could ask, could Artef manage with an acting staff that had three times more men than women? This question brings us to the issue of repertoire. Of the 23 major plays that Artef produced, 22 were written by men. *Trikenish* (Drought), one of the two Artef plays that had been translated from the original English, was authored by women: Hallie Flanagan and Margaret Ellen Clifford. The play's original title was *Can You Hear Their Voices?* It was a progressive rather than revolutionary piece, and Flanagan was greatly displeased with the radical rewrite it received at Artef. It is noteworthy that it was the only Artef production in which there was roughly the same number of male and female roles. Indeed, an interesting phenomenon emerges when one considers the ratio of female-to-male parts in Artef productions: The revolutionary plays contained the smallest number of female parts. For example, *Naftuli Botwin*, by Avrum Veviora — 7 female, 22 male parts; *Di shniter* (The reapers), by Ziskind Lev — 4 female parts, and 29 male parts; *Brilliantn* (Diamonds), by Avrum Veviora — 6 female, 13 male; *Hirsh leckert*, by Aron Kushnirov — 6 female, 21 male; *The Third Parade*, by Charles Walker and Paul Peters — 2 female, 34 male; *Boytre gazlen* (The outlaw), by Moishe Kulback — 5 female, 31 male.

The disparity is not as striking in plays that focus on domestic rather than on public affairs: *Dostigayev*, by Maxim Gorki has 11 female parts and 22 male parts; Sholem Aleichem's *Ristokatn* has a similar proportion, but then his *200,000* presents us again with four female versus 16 male parts. Add to this the production of *Keytn* (Chains), by H. Leivick, with an all-male cast, and *The Good Soldier Schweik*, by Jaroslav Hasek, with 48 male parts and six female parts, and it becomes clear why only 25 percent of the actors' collective consisted of women, some of whom occasionally played the part of "the young boy" in the heavily male productions.

Needless to say, none of these plays discussed the problems which even the most politically radical of women faced on a daily basis. Never do we meet a working woman who is neither very young nor very old and who struggles with the realities of family, motherhood, and the workplace. Rather, the women we encounter in these plays are, for the most part, the mothers, the wives, the sisters, and the lovers (with an occasional temptress thrown in) of the men who rule or who wish to rule this universe.

All this brings us back to the so-called Chana

Shpiner syndrome. Why did this woman who demonstrated enormous inner resources, who as a young, illiterate girl had the willpower and the ability to organize her coworkers, who had been employed since she was eight years old, why did not she, like so many of her male comrades, serve on the Artef Board, the Artistic Council, or any other committee? Did she not wish to have some impact on the life of the organization of which she was one of the seven founders? The only sensible answer is that from the moment she became involved in the theater, she got the clear message that it was a male dominion, a power structure where women were still, despite all the revolutionary talk, at the bottom of the pyramid. After all, her teachers, directors, playwrights, and newspaper critics were all male. It was their boat, and it was their task to navigate it as skillfully as they could. Such was the way of the world.

In fact, Chana Shpiner was doing worse than many of her colleagues in the bourgeois theater, where, for example, women born or married into theatrical families could learn various aspects of theater work and could add management to acting. Moreover, in a theater like Artef, committed to the dramatization of the group and the elimination of the star system, Shpiner could not even be a star or a vamp whose pop-

ularity would have translated into money and power on the commercial stage. Indeed Shpiner and her female colleagues — with the possible exception of one whose husband was a major powerbroker in the group — were confined psychologically and institutionally to the secondary role of the good trooper who works hard, supports the organizational goals, and is content to let others run the show.

We may conclude, then, that in the matter of women, the Jewish revolutionary theater was but a child of its time. Whereas it made repeated efforts, albeit clumsy at times, to present on stage non-Jewish workers, especially blacks and Italians, in order to emphasize the bond between workers of all races and ethnic origins, it did not in like manner champion the cause of women's equality in the work force and in public life. Indeed, Artef's revolutionary ethos, which prescribed the rejection of domestic dramas and of the star-centered family-run troupe, led to the limitation of the options of the company's female members. Moreover, this policy resulted in the perpetuation of the traditional image of the role of women as quasi-equal partners. The message, be it direct or subtle, was projected not merely to the company's personnel, but also to Artef's mostly left-wing spectators, men and women alike.



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## Workshops

Shulamis Dion

WOMEN'S SONGS OF PROTEST, STRUGGLE, AND RESISTANCE<sup>1</sup>

This participatory workshop presented both well-known and seldom heard songs that demonstrate a range of emotional responses to the external circumstances from which they arose. These songs document women's reactions to war, to conditions in the workplace at the start of the great labor movements, and to the Holocaust.

These are the songs I presented at the workshop: *Oy a layterl tsum himl/Oy, a ladder up to Heaven* (Beregovski collection); *Forn forstu fun mir avek/You are going away from me* (Beregovski collection); *Arbeter-froyen/Working women* (Dovid Edelshtot, in *Perl fun yidishn lid*); *In droyzn iz finster/It's dark outside* (Beregovski collection); *Mayn rue-plats/My resting place* (Morris Rosenfeld, in *Mir trogn a gezang*); *A gantse vokh horevet zi/A whole work she toils* (Beregovski collection); *Rivkele di shabesdikel/Rifkele, the Sabbath one* (Peysekh Kaplan, in *Yes, We Sang!*); *Lid fun a kale—1942/Song of a bride—1942* (Khane Safran, in *Morgn Frayhayt*); *Kalt/Cold* (Miriam Harel, in *Singing For Survival*); *Der binyen/The building* (Beyle Gottesman, in *Zumerteg*).

The two songs reprinted below are remarkable and virtually unknown documents of women's responses to times of hardship.

*A gantse vokh horevet zi*: This song is from the earlier of Moishe Beregovski's two major collections of folk songs. This earlier group consists largely of topical workers' songs collected in the 1930s in Ukraine, many of which are unique to this anthology. Beregovsky himself made a point of collecting songs that contained, as does this one, both Yiddish and Russian text; he maintained that the great folk collectors in Poland neglected such songs as not being "pure" in their Yiddish folk content. *A gantse vokh*, sung by a woman named Rokhl Resina in Odessa in the mid-1930s, offers the lively impression of a young woman who finds herself caught between traditional and modern ways and who, at least for the moment of the song, is not having much luck with either. The immediate, "snapshot" quality of the text and its detailed description of the young woman's interactions with those around her are unusual and poignant.

## A GANTSE VOKH HOREVET ZI

(Beregovski: Old Jewish Folk Music)

אַ גאַנצע וואָך האָרעוועט זי...

אַ גאַנצע וואָך האָרעוועט זי ביים שניידער אויף דער קאַלקע.  
ס'קומט דער פֿרייטיק פֿאַר נאַכט. ווערט זי פֿון דער אַרבעט וואָלנע.  
זי וואָשט זיך אויס דעם קאַפּ. זי פֿראַגט זיך אָן דעם צאַפּ.  
זי אוספֿייצט ניט עסן די לאַקשן מיט דער יויך.  
איז זי שוין אין שטוב ניטאָ.

זי כאַפט דאָס רויטע שאַליקל פֿאַרימפעט אויף איין אויער.  
זי האָט קיין צייט ניט מיט קיינעם צו רעדן.  
ווייל דער שיינער וואָרט ביים טויער.  
זי גייט אַרום מיטן שיינעם ביז צוועלף אַ זיגער אויף דער נאַכט.  
און אויף מאָרגן גאַנצטשעט זי אים אין טאַנצקלאָס.  
אויף אַ זיגער אַכט.

מיט צרות און נעפֿריאַטנאַסט איז זי שטענדיק געווינט.  
ס'מאַכט שוין ביי איר ניט אויס.  
דעם ערשטן פעטשאַטעק כאַפט זי אויס פֿונעם דוואָרניק:  
„טשעוואָ טי מניע טאַק פֿאַזונאַ בעספֿאַקויעשו“  
זי כאַפט אַרויס אַ פֿיטאַקל. און שטופֿט דעם דוואָרניק אונטער.  
זי איז שוין גאַראַנטירט צו גיין מיטן שיינעם אַ גאַנצן ווינטער.

דעם צווייטן פעטשאַטעק כאַפט זי אויס פֿון דער מאַמען ווען זי קומט נאָר אַרײַן אין שטוב.  
ווען זי קומט נאָר אַרײַן אין שטוב אַרײַן הייבט די מאַמע זי אָן צו שעלטן:  
„אי וויי, טאַכטער'סט ליגן אין דר'ערד, ס'ט פֿירן אַזוינע וועלטן!“  
דו גייסט אַרום מיטן שיינעם ביז צוועלף אַ זיגער ביי נאַכט.  
און איך דערקען שוין אין דיר: „סט אים גאַנצטשעט אויף מאָרגן אויף דער נאַכט.“

ווען זי דערהערט אַ חתונה ביי איר חבֿרטעס אַ פֿריינטל, אויף דער חתונה מוז זי גיין. זי מוז דאָך כאַפֿן אַ טענצל.  
דער שיינער איז ראַספֿאַרדטל, און זי טאַנצט נאָך קלאַנג.  
און אויף מאָרגן באַריסט ער זי – איז זי געקומען אין אַ צעריסענעם פֿאַלטאָ.

The whole week she works at a bench at the tailor shop. Friday night comes and she's through work; she washes her hair, does up her braids, barely touches the soup and noodles before she's out of the house. She tosses the red shawl in a hurry over one ear.

No time to talk to anyone, because her sweetie is waiting by the gate. She goes around with him until midnight, and makes a date for the next evening in a dance class at eight.

She's used to trials and tribulations, she doesn't care any more, The first scolding she catches is from the doorman: "Why are you bothering me at this hour?" She grabs a fiver and bribes the fellow, and now she's guaranteed to go around late with her sweetie the whole winter.

The second scolding is from her mother. The minute she comes in the house her mama starts in cursing: "Oy vey, daughter, damned if you're going to carry on like this!! You go around with that "sweetie" of yours until midnight, and I see it in you already that you've made another date with him for tomorrow night!"

When she hears about a wedding of a friend's friend, she just has to go and grab a dance. Her sweetie arranges everything and she goes and dances to the beat; and in the morning he makes a heavy pass at her, and she goes home with her coat torn.

**Lid fun a kale:** I discovered this poem in the *Morgn frayhayt* while researching another topic. It moved me immediately because it echoed my own mother's experience as a "Rosie the Riveter," a young war bride working in overalls in a factory while my father was fighting in Europe. I was not able to determine whether it had ever been set to music, but the text is clearly in the style of older Yiddish love songs. I found a melody for the text in another song of similar content—that is, the song of a young woman working in a factory: *Eyder ikh leyg zikh shlofn darf ikh oyfshteyn* ("even before I lie down to sleep I have to get up")—in Ruth Rubin's *Voices of a People*. I introduced the "new" song at the Workmens' Circle event, "Mame-loshn 1995," and I have been teaching and circulating it since.

#### LID FUN A KALE—1942

(Khane Safran, *Morgn frayhayt*, May 10, 1942)

### ליד פֿון אַ כּלה – 1942 חנה סאַפּראַן

פֿויגל פֿאַר מײַן פֿענצטער, צוויטשערט, צוויי, צוויי, צוויי,  
ווי איז איצט מײַן שענסטער? אַזוי ווייט פֿון מיר ...

כּיהאַב זײַן אַרט פֿאַרנומען בײַם ראָד אין דער פֿאַבריק;  
אין רוש פֿון רעדערשומען היט איך אונדזער גליק.

פֿויגל – פֿליגל פֿלאַטער! פֿלי דורך וואַלקנס ווייט!  
זעסטו וווּ מײַן ליבסטן, זאָג אים כּיבלייב אים טריי.

זאָג אים – כּוועל זײַן מוטיק ווי ער איז אינעם קריג;  
מעג קאַמף זײַן לאַנג און בלוטיק וועט האַנט ניט ווערן  
מיר.

פֿויגל מײַנער, טרייער, דערצייל ניט, אַז איך בענק,  
סײַזל זײַן בליק זײַן קלאַרער ווען ער טרייבט דעם טאַנק.

דערצייל אים: סײַליט דאָס בעז שוין, דער קאַרשנבוים, ד  
רוי,  
כּיהאַב פֿאַרפֿלאַנצט פֿיל בלומען פֿאַר אונדזער צוקונפֿטהוי

פֿויגל, פֿליגל פֿלאַטער! פֿלי דורך פֿייער, שטאַל,  
מײַן קוש אויף דינע פֿליגל, מײַן אַטעם אין דיין מויל...

Bird before my window, twitter. Where is my loveliest one? Far from me. . . I've taken his place at the wheel in the factory, and I defend our happiness amid the rushing of machinery. Fly, little bird, through the far clouds, and when you see my beloved tell him I am faithful. Tell him I will be as brave as he is in battle, and no matter how long and bloody it may be, my hand here will not tire. Don't tell him I long for him; let his eyes be clear as he drives his tank. Tell him lilacs are blooming, cherry trees and roses; I have planted many flowers for our future home. Fly, little bird, through fire and steel, my kiss on your wings, my breath in your mouth. . .

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<sup>1</sup>Translations are by Shulamis Dion.

#### Gitl Schaechter-Viswanath

#### YIDDISH IN A TRILINGUAL HOUSEHOLD

I grew up in the 1960s in a mini-Yiddish-speaking environment in the Bronx. There were several other families on the block who had made a conscious decision to live near each other so that their children would have Yiddish-speaking friends. And we did end up as friends, and we remain in touch to this day.

I went to Camp Hemshekh, the Bundist summer camp, where Yiddish was reinforced in an informal, rural setting. I also attended a Sholem Aleichem Shul five days a week, after school, where all the courses were taught in Yiddish. After graduation, I went on to the Mittleshul and

then graduated from the Jewish Teachers Seminary.

Today, Yiddish continues to define a major portion of my life: I work as a Yiddish typesetter and editor, I write Yiddish poetry, and . . . I speak Yiddish with my three children.

However, my children don't have friends on the block who speak Yiddish. They don't attend a Yiddish summer camp (there is none in existence). They do go to Pripetshik, a school that meets on Sunday mornings, but for them there will be no *mitl-shul* or seminary. Once they leave Pripetshik, there will be no further academic involvement with Yiddish unless they decide to take courses in college.

And here comes the ubiquitous question: Why? Why bother speaking Yiddish? Why put myself out if Yiddish has no future? Frankly, that question, Why?, saddens me. It saddens me that this question has, more often than not, been put to me by Jews who are familiar with the world of Yiddish.

I couldn't answer the question better than Sholem Aleichem's Tevye, who found himself seeking rational reasons for observing *yidishkayt* and finally realized that he could sum it up in one word: tradition. Even many non-religious Jews observe some traditions—lighting candles on *shabes* or eating *matse* on *peysek*—which, if they started to think about it, are Torah commandments. And, if it's from the Torah, what's the point if I'm not religious? For me, once you start asking too many questions and lose sight of the profound value of tradition, it's a slippery slope heading toward a place where I'm not sure I want to be.

I first met my husband, Meylekh, at the Yugntruf retreat called *yidish vokh* (Jewish week). I was not aware of this at the time, but later, when we got married and had our first child, he decided that his children would speak his *mame-loshn*, Tamil, a South Indian language. I was a little disappointed. Since he spoke fluent Yiddish, I somehow thought that he would participate in speaking Yiddish to the children. He didn't, but I plowed ahead on my own. Yiddish songs, books, stories, tapes—whatever would add another Yiddish word to the household was fair game.

As the children got older, I started working with them on their *alef-bays* (Yiddish ABCs), so that by the time they went to yeshiva, they already knew their Hebrew letters, too, and they were very proud of this.

I play Yiddish games with them: word games, Twenty Questions, Hot & Cold, Hide & Seek, Blind Man's Buff. I act silly with them in Yiddish. I play English board games with them in Yiddish—anything to normalize the language and make it more child friendly in 1995.

Meylekh and I have both incorporated our respective languages into our *yidishkayt* as well. For example, at the beginning of *shabes*, there is a special blessing for the children, which is traditionally recited, in Hebrew, by the father. In our home, I also do it in Yiddish. When we make *kidesh* (kiddush), Meylekh

has the children recite a small section of the blessing in Tamil; then they recite the regular *kidesh*. This seamless weaving back and forth from Hebrew to Yiddish to Tamil to Hebrew is the result of a very conscious decision on our parts, because this is what the children see, understand, and may remember: an integrated world where the language they speak on a daily basis can also be relevant to the language of prayer and tradition. For me, this has been just as important as, if not more so than, simply speaking the language.

I noticed, as time went on, that the more I worked with the children, the more Meylekh worked with them. The more Tamil events he took them to, the more I sought out appropriate Yiddish activities. Our efforts feed on each other in a positive symbiosis, despite the fact that we're both competing for the small amount of our children's precious time available for these activities.

The children appear to be very comfortable with their Yiddish and Jewish identities, and they are proud of their achievements so far. Given the amount of positive reinforcement and sweat that I've put into it, I'm thrilled that they've gotten as far as they have. In truth, the only one who feels like the odd one out is me. I have not been able to progress past basic Tamil, so that, while Meylekh understands all my Yiddish discussions with the children, and the children understand my English discussions with him, I'm at a loss when it comes to understanding their discussions with him.

Is sticking with Yiddish easy? No. Not only do you have to bone up on your own grammar from time to time, but you find yourself frequently running to the dictionary and, if you can't find the word, you either try to make up a suitable word or just use the English word if you absolutely have to until you can find out how to say it in Yiddish.

Will I stop speaking Yiddish to the children because I get discouraged when I hear them lapse into English with each other? No. I ask them, in Yiddish: "Who's speaking English?" Then, being children, they blame each other for being the instigator and revert to Yiddish. One time, I overheard Arele (age 5) and Meena-Lifshe (6) playing in the next room. She used an English word, and I heard him say, in Yiddish: "Meena-Lifshe, are you a Jew? Then speak Yiddish!"

I can only hope that even though my children's Yiddish exposure is very limited compared with what I had growing up, they will continue to internalize the warmth and *heymishkayt* of both Yiddish and *yidishkayt* and that they will continue to speak the language even as they reach adulthood without plaguing themselves with the eternal question, Why?

What, we may wonder, will the Yiddish world be like then, in fifteen, twenty years? Will our children speak Yiddish with *their* children? We can only say *halevay* (if only it would be so) and hope for the best!

## Reading/Commentary

Chava Rosenfarb

### A BILINGUAL READING OF HER FICTION

The following is an excerpt from my most recent novel, *Brivtsu Abrashn* (Letters to Abrasha).<sup>1</sup> The first-person narrator of the text is the heroine of the novel. Her name is Miriam.

The action takes place immediately after the liquidation of the Lodz ghetto, in the boxcar of a freight train heading for Auschwitz.

#### IN THE BOXCAR

We were about seventy people in the boxcar speeding into the unknown. I say "about" seventy, because none of us in the boxcar was able to come up with an exact number, although many had counted.

Whatever the reason for this compulsive counting, a mere pastime it certainly was not. Because within this boxcar time was too precious to allow it merely to pass. As a matter of fact, time was the only subject of importance, the only issue truly occupying our minds. Time was a mysterious treasure, a sort of miserly deity to which we addressed our prayers, imploring it to continue, to stay on. Time. It throbbed in our veins. It pounded in our hearts like drums. It was the handsomest lover whom we desired as powerfully as we desired our crust of bread, since all the other passions of body and soul were as dead as dreams never remembered.

The floor of the boxcar shook. The travelers sitting there swayed to and fro like sheaves in the wind. There were children amongst us, there were babies miraculously saved from previous deportations. I thought of the twenty years of my life, unable to grasp them whole with my mind. I felt like a baby in a diaper, miraculously saved—for this trip.

There were other sounds beside the wailing of the little ones. There were the sighs of the adults and the groans of the sick. There were the sounds of prayer. And there was also the anxious croaking of grandmothers, or the surreally ordinary conversations of the young. There was the uncanny sound of my own voice.—And then there was also the occasional sudden silence bombarding the ear drums, tolling in my head with a thousand bells. There was the near-darkness of dusk during the day, and the pitch blackness during the night.

The small boxcar window was covered with a grating of barbed wire, like a window in a prison cell or a madhouse. It was located at the upper corner, to the right of the sealed door. A dozen hands held on to the knotted mesh of wire separating us from the outside world. Amid the entanglement of fingers and wire, open human mouths poked out like the beaks of abandoned baby birds, waiting in vain for their parents to come and rescue them. People were squabbling over a place at the

window. Everybody wanted to be near it; each one considered him- or herself entitled to a ration of fresh air.

Our group consisted of friends who had hid together with my family and me during the liquidation of the ghetto. Amongst the men in our group was also Gabi, the leader of our youth movement in the ghetto. I was glad that we had him with us. There was an aura of authority about him. At his side sat his beautiful raven-haired wife Sonia with their baby girl in her arms.

As the squabbling at the window continued, Gabi jumped to his feet and exclaimed, "Listen, people, let there be order at the window!"

Reluctantly, they heeded him, for it had become clear from the start that Gabi's was the voice of a born leader, and the wish for a leader at such a time was great. Gabi decreed that we must take turns at the window from now on, so that everybody could have an opportunity to breathe the fresh air. A murmur of approval followed his words. Here was a man who, in addition to himself and his near ones, still had the interest of others at heart.

And so came our group's turn to stand near the window. Except for Sonia and the baby—she refused to budge from her place—we all wedged ourselves toward it through the clusters of people. Abrasha, my former teacher and present friend, stopped in the center of the boxcar, afraid to step on someone lying on the crowded floor. He removed his glasses and cleaned them with the lapel of his jacket.

I stood at the window, staring back at him. Our fogged-up eyes, like the eyes of two ghosts meeting in a bad dream, exchanged a long look. Finally he pushed himself through to me and started to hum Leivik's lullaby in my ear, paraphrasing the words, "Dreamy little girl, *meydele mayns*, don't peer so deeply into my eyes."

At that moment Papa noticed a man on the road that ran alongside the tracks. He thrust his hand out through the window grating and let out a shout at the top of his voice, "You, brother! Say, where are they taking us?"

"Where are they taking me?" I heard the question echoing inside my skull.

The man called back. I could hear his voice faintly, but the wind carried off the words. Where were they taking us?

After a while we scrambled back to our place and sat down, squeezed in among our rucksacks, valises, bundles, parcels. The next time our turn to stand at the window came up, we did not budge from our corner, which had become our last refuge, our last home. We had no energy left to move our limbs, to elbow our way among the piles of bodies and pieces of luggage. It was difficult enough just to get over to the slop pail in the opposite corner, when it was absolutely necessary to reach it. We had left



behind such sentiments as embarrassment and shame concerning our physiological functions.

The train's ceaseless clip-clopping, instead of lulling our anguish, expanded it. Time—so threatening and so sacred—ticked away in the beat of the wheels, a rhythmic swaying of the pendulum in the throat of a gigantic clock without hands. Our fear swelled up like the goiter of an enormous green toad. Fear hammered at my temples. I could hear it in the whistling of the locomotive through the night, in the pooh-pooh-breath of smoke and steam spewing from under its belly. The thick blackness inside the wagon invaded my brain. I was overcome simultaneously by unbearable fatigue and a feeling of humility. A powerful emotion swept over me of tenderness, for my parents, for my boyfriend Marek, for my sister Vierka, and her boyfriend Isaac—and for my dear friend Abrasha. I felt a tenderness for our entire group of friends, and for all those present in this boxcar—as well as for my own self. I felt a tenderness for the immense, the immeasurable endlessness speeding by us outside the small grated window—a tenderness for the magnificence of the world which was receding, running backwards, rushing away from me, and sinking into the void beyond the horizon. A tenderness even for Him in the heavens—no matter whether He was there or not.

It seemed to me that not only were we experiencing the horror of these hours, but that the entire universe was experiencing it along with us, that all that which existed in this world was present with us in this boxcar.

The ceaseless whistling of the locomotive through the night mingled with the lilt of the pious Jews who, wrapped in their white prayer shawls, recited the psalms. They did not interrupt their recitation even when Gabi, as if a dybbuk had entered him, rose to his feet, climbed onto his rucksack so that everyone could see him, and holding on to the ceiling of the wagon with his hand, made his loud resonant voice reach into every corner of the boxcar.

"People, don't give up hope!" he shouted. "The hour of liberation is approaching! The Germans are suffering defeat on all fronts!" Using the information he had gleaned from the illegal radio he had listened to in the ghetto prior to our deportation, he gave a detailed account of the situation on the battlefronts, and of the intricate diplomatic negotiations, which bore proof that the end of the war was at hand, approaching most likely with the oncoming day.

But Gabi's optimistic words reached neither the ears of those reciting the psalms, nor of those holding children in their arms. Nor did his own Sonia listen to him. She was oblivious to what was going on around her. And then there were a few people who openly mocked Gabi. For instance the man with the crooked shoulder, who screwed his pointy finger into his tem-

ple, and barked at Gabi sarcastically, "You're coo-coo, young man!" Turning to his neighbors, he said to them in a jarring voice, "Listen to this humming bird, humming so sweetly! Just listen to him!"

And then there was another Jew, who accompanied Gabi's speech with the slurping sound of his sobs. He was a mousy little man, thin and hunched. A long gray beard cascaded down his raised knees, so that nothing except the beard and his tiny wet eyes were visible. As Gabi talked on, the little man shook his torso, mumbling through dribbling lips like some Jeremiah, "May your words reach from your mouth straight to God's ears, woe is us. But the Almighty prefers silence to words, woe is us. That's why He Himself keeps silent, woe is us. He doesn't respond in any other way but through silence. He's dumb, woe is us. So please, young man, shut up and don't be so smart."

We ate. Before our departure, the charitable Nazis had allotted us half a loaf of bread each. I watched Abrasha as we ate. He stared at Balcie, Gabi and my girl friend Malka's mother. A sentimental couplet popped into my head. *Mayn yidishe mame*. . .

I transferred my gaze to my own mother, whom I had until then avoided looking at. She belonged to that particular type of mother from whose heart love poured out abundantly, without restraint. She was an overprotective mother, annoyingly so. In my childhood, she would run after me with my half-eaten food, begging me to eat it up. She was forever afraid that I might catch a cold. "Put on your scarf! Slip on your woolen underwear! Don't run! Don't sweat! Don't walk around barefoot!" She never abandoned her worries, her tensions and anxieties, trembling constantly over our safety, our health, our lives. Any wonder? It had been such a long day of danger, a danger lasting for generations.

Balcie, Gabi and Malka's mother, was a different variant of the Jewish mother. She was down-to-earth, her emotions concealed behind a facade of unsentimental matter-of-factness. She was a self-controlled and controlling mother. Now too she pretended to be calm. But fear was screaming from her eyes. She frequently rushed to the slop pail in the other corner of the boxcar.

And beside Balcie sat Mother Hanka, whose husband had died of tuberculosis in the ghetto. Hanka had never been a real mother, yet her maternal qualities were evident in her devotion to her step daughter, my girlfriend Sarah, who was running a fever and had her head buried in Hanka's lap.

The night dragged on. The smell of the overflowing slop pail in the corner mixed with the smell of the wind piercing through the grating on the window; it mixed with the fragrance of ripe fruit, of hay and wilting leaves.

Suddenly, the scream of a woman pierced the darkness like the cry of a bird of prey. The woman spat

out a torrent of curses into the night, "May the day of my birth be cursed! May the day be damned when I brought my children into this world!" Her outcry became the signal for the other mothers to explode with curses and blasphemies.

My parents were leaning against each other, their bodies shaking in unison to the rhythm of the wheels. When there was finally a lull in the screams, Mama said to us softly, "Don't be afraid. They won't separate us. We are all healthy, able-bodied adults." She beckoned to my sister Vierka to approach, and leaned forward toward us. "Remember, all of you," she said with an ominous tremor in her voice. "We hold on to each other's hands and we don't let go whatever happens."

I wished that trip would never come to an end. Then Mama leaned down to me, and said, "Crawl over to Sonia and tell her that I still have two spoonfuls of sugar left, and that she can have them for the baby."

I wiped my face and crawled over to Sonia. I touched her arm, telling her what Mama had said. She stared at me, her eyes screaming with the rage of a tortured animal.

"What do I need the sugar for?" she shrugged, pointing to the baby, "Hear her snoring? I drugged her with poppy-seed broth."

"Take the sugar," I insisted. "You might need it later on. You never know."

"I do know," she snapped back. Her lips were as black as her hair. She gave me that terrible look of her eyes, and indicated the hysterically lamenting mothers. "They also know."

"Don't lose hope," I implored her.

A fierce grimace disfigured her face, "You'd better shut up. What do you know? Have you ever been a mother?"

I squirmed and moved away from her. In my forlornness I glanced at the grated window, and noticed an orange light on the sliced-up sky. "It's going to be day soon." I said to my parents.

The moment I said this, the train began to slow down. The locomotive puffed and heaved as though it were running out of steam. Then it emitted a prolonged sigh and grew silent. The boxcar jerked convulsively back and forth, throwing the people backwards and forward. The overflowing slop pail in the corner of the boxcar swayed and turned over, spilling its content on those sitting in its vicinity. Then it all came to a stop.

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The sealed wagon door was unbolted and thrown open. A wind smacked us in the face with fistfuls of fresh air, piercing our nostrils with its chill. My head swam. A last shapeless thought passed through my mind, a last memory I don't know of what. Dazzling daylight blinded my eyes. "*Aussteigen! Disembark!*" Deafening bellows filled our ears. Dogs barked. The sound of many

whistles—once it started, it never stopped.

In the ensuing confusion some women seemed to have lost their minds. With trembling hands they braided their little girls' braids, or combed their boys' hair. Some grabbed their parcels, talking to them instead of talking to their children. Others stood still like stumps of wood frozen into their places, or like pillars of salt, paralyzed in the middle of their movements.

"*Aussteigen! Disembark!*" the bellows continued.

We jumped out of the boxcar, just as the other wagons disgorged their human freight. Suddenly we found ourselves in a throng of thousands. Odd-looking men, wearing odd-looking striped pajamas busied themselves amongst us, jumping into the open wagons. A nauseating smell hovered in the air.

As soon as our group gathered together on the crammed platform, Gabi grabbed one striped man by the arm. "Where are we?" he asked in a shout as though the other were deaf.

"Auschwitz!" the man shot back. He looked like a clown in his striped pajama-suit and beret. He shook off Gabi's hand and climbed into our boxcar from which a number of sick people had not yet managed to disembark.

A few minutes before the train had stopped, Gabi had whispered in my ear that in his opinion we were arriving at a concentration camp called Auschwitz. He had heard of Auschwitz on the clandestine radio in the ghetto. But now Gabi gaped at us in utter bewilderment "It can't be... Impossible!" he gasped.

"Tell me, Mister," someone from the crowd asked another striped man. "Is this still Poland, or are we in Germany already?"

"Neither Poland, nor Germany!" The sweaty man pointed to the heavens. "This is *Himmelland!*" He roared out the command, "Put all your bundles and valises on the ground to your right!" He started snatching suitcases and sacks from people's hands, and with his colleagues, piled them up at the edge of the platform.

Gabi mumbled something forlornly, casting desperate looks around himself. We stared at him. His lips trembled. His face was chalk white. His small gray eyes acquired a dark reddish hue, as if the rising sun mixed with Sonia's raven hair was reflected in them. He threw his arm around her and the baby.

All the boxcars had spat out their loads at last. The open doors looked like the countless gaping mouths of a monster hungry again.

A brigade of SS men, whips in hand, dogs on leashes at their sides, lurched toward us. The whips swished through the air above our heads. To the accompaniment of the dogs' barking, the SS men made order among the chaotic mass of people stretched alongside the tracks. The men in the funny-looking stripes continued to plunge into our midst, grabbing packs, rucksacks and valises from the hands

of those who still clung to their belongings.

"You'll get it back later on!" one of the striped fellows promised a crippled young man who frenziedly pressed a small briefcase to his chest.

"But how?" The cripple attempted to wrestle with him.

"Ask for the *Himmelkommando*, idiot!" The man in stripes tore the briefcase from the cripple's arms, nearly toppling him.

We had already discarded our hand luggage and before I even managed to look around, the rucksack was torn from my back, as were the rucksacks of the others in my group. Handbags full of family photos were pulled from the arms of the three mothers amongst us, cast onto a separate heap of papers, letters, photographs and prayer books. Each of us was left with no more than the remainder of the half-loaf of bread saved for a "black hour." We held the bread under our arms, while clinging with convulsed fingers to the hands of our loved ones.

"Women and children remain here! Men move to the other side!" The order thundered once, and then again.

A sudden hush. The enormous open sky overhead looked as hollow as the inside of an empty bell. The rustle of loose papers scattered on the ground, the whisper of pages from the small psalm books, fingered by the breeze, faintly reached our deafened ears. All we could really hear were the chilling words of the command and the sound of the whistles.

The members of our group clung tightly to one another, very tightly. We were like dots entangled in a knot, woven into a dense web of other knots, which all together made up the three thousand heads of the crowd. How could these knots of blood-relatedness, of devotion, of love—be torn asunder? Mama held us frantically in the embrace of her arms, which seemed to have grown in length. Only Abrasha, attached to no one, hovered around us all, in a kind of dancing step, as if preparing to protect us, or, on the contrary, as if he were seeking our protection by trying to be included in our midst, even though we had not excluded him.

"Men! All the men to the other side! Quickly! Women and children stay where you are!"

A cohort of SS men began mechanically tearing the reluctant men from their women and children. They did so in rhythm, barking, "*Los! Los!*" staccato-like, as though they were ripping up sacks and dividing them into strips—sacks and not people, not body from body, flesh from flesh, life from life; not like tearing limbs apart, but like cutting ropes which had become entangled. The faces of the SS men reflected not a single trace of awareness that they were inflicting pain, not the slightest sign that this scene touched the surface of their humanity. Nothing. They were robots with stony faces. And yet these robots, so elegantly attired in daz-

zling uniforms, spotless white gloves on their hands, looked so shamelessly human. Did they belong to a new race, or were they the scum of the old one? What were they? Who were they? If they had hearts and minds, then what was going on inside them at this moment? It was of enormous importance to find this out. The fate of the entire world depended on it—although this was no longer any of our concern.

An SS man clamped his hand like a pliers around Abrasha's arm. He hurled him in the direction of the column of men which was forming at a distance across from us. Abrasha had a silly smile on his face as he waved, calling something to us which we were too deaf to hear.

Marek kissed me. "Remember that I love you!" were his last words to me. Gabi, too, had already been torn away from Sonia and the baby. Papa escaped the SS men's notice and we held him for a little longer in our arms. When was he discovered and dragged away? I looked on. I saw, and I no longer knew how it had happened. Consciousness stopped registering. Memory was obliterated. I stared at the column of men across from us and with blinded eyes searched in vain for Papa amidst the river of fathers, brothers, sons, and lovers.

Here, in the river of women and children, there was not a sound, no sighs, no sobs. The women had forgotten how to shed tears. Tears did not belong here.

"Forward march!" The SS men thundered, commanding the column of women to move. The silence grew so heavy, so loaded with tension that it seemed about to explode and shatter the entire universe. I felt its pressure weighing on my skull with an almost tangible weight. We shuffled ahead. In front of me Sonia was stumbling along with the baby in her arms. Malka and Balcie were supporting her, while two women I didn't know, a mother and her daughter, made up their row of five. Urine trickled down from between Sonia's legs.

In our row of five, Mama and Vierka were on my left side, as well as Hanka and Sarah. The morning breeze held back its breath. My heart was about to leap from my bosom. It pulsed on the tip of my tongue. It pulsed within the emptiness of the hollow sky. The twenty-eighth of August 1944 was a dazzling, sun-drenched day.

A tall fence of barbed wire appeared to our left. A group of extremely elegant SS men of superior rank, apparently wearing brand-new uniforms, in honor of this festive occasion, stood in front of a broad wide-open gate. Above the gate was a large wrought-iron sign in beautifully shaped letters which read, "*Arbeit macht frei!* Work makes you free." And—was it possible?—we could hear an orchestra playing! Tangos. Jazz music. Had it only now started to play, or had it been playing all along? And this entire carnival—had it just started, or had it been going on for eternities? Had the SS men only now embarked on the selection—or had that too been

going on since the day of creation? Massive chimneys popped into view in the distance ahead of us.

We were moving ahead, five abreast. Sarah, her face covered with fever splotches, chattered to Hanka. "Hold onto me tight. Straighten your back and smile. Yes, smile. You must smile. I... I will also smile."

Her red lips worked themselves into a grimace which resembled a smile. She thrust her head forward, intent on showing her trick to us. During all this time Mama, Vierka, and I had not exchanged a single word, nor did we dare to look at one other. Claspings each other so tightly that it hurt, we now faithfully copied Sarah's smiling grimace.

I did not take my eyes off Hanka and Sarah, because I could not bring myself to look at Mama and Vierka during these precious minutes. By no means could I look at them. I was afraid that if I did, I might collapse. Mama held me so tight that I could feel each of her fingers clawing into the flesh of my arm. She seemed so much taller than I, so much taller and stronger.

We were at the gate. Now we could see the orchestra inside, near the gate. The musicians wore striped pajamas. Were they men or women? This circus band seemed to be swimming toward us, coming ever closer, aiming at the head of our column. Our column—a snake sticking out a double-forked tongue, one of its tips turned to the left, the other to the right, one pointing toward the gate to life, the other. . .—consisted of women and children shuffling off.

I could see them stumbling away from the head of the column. Then, suddenly, a green arm with a red swastika armband on it flashed before my eyes. A hand ever so carefully, ever so gently, was pulling the baby from Sonia's arms. The hand did it with such a light touch, almost an affectionate gesture, as if it were removing a soft pillow from Sonia's hands. The baby girl, drugged by the poppy-seed potion which Sonia had given her in the train, was sleeping with her tiny mouth open.

"Was? Wa-as?" Sonia stammered in German, forming screaming question marks with her empty arms. She stretched her hands out to the SS man, as if to a good uncle who had taken the baby for a moment to play with, to smack his lips at, or tickle under the chin—and then would restore her to her mother's arms. In fact, the SS man grew thoughtful, and made a movement as if he were indeed about to return the baby to Sonia.

The dashing, dark-haired SS man who stood beside him inquired, "*Was ist den los?*"

"Nothing at all, Herr Doctor," the young SS man grinned. "But she's very pretty, so let's allow her to go with the baby."

"By all means. But not today. The baby goes today. She will follow tomorrow." The Herr Doctor smiled a jovial decisive smile.

In the blink of an eye the baby vanished from

sight. Sonia, unaware of what was happening, took a step backward, hitting against our row with the entire weight of her swooning body. However, the young SS man caught hold of her and with an energetic thrust of his arm hurled her toward the open gate of the fence—toward life.

"We have nothing to be afraid of." I felt Mama clutching my arm and pinching it, as the green arm with the swastika flashed again before my eyes.

This time a hand descended upon Balcie's shoulder. Malka gripped at her mother's arm tightly. "She's my sister," Malka declared in German, her voice calm and matter-of-fact.

"How old?" the young suntanned SS man asked. He was blond, had blue eyes, thick, dark-blond eyebrows, dark apple-red cheeks, and cherry-red lips. His face looked as if it were painted. His sky-blue eyes blinked facetiously at Malka.

"She's thirty-nine-years old," Malka replied.

The young SS man glanced questioningly at the strapping Herr Doctor, and he, the angel and guardian of the gates to Heaven and Earth, deigned to nod his head. Malka and Balcie walked off after Sonia toward the gate of life, along with the younger of the two women who had made up their row of five.

Every sound I heard during the second which followed, no matter how faint, every crease on the faces above the green uniforms in front of us, no matter how slight, every nuance of light and shadow were—as if with the tip of a sharp knife—chiseled on the blank screen of my brain, until it all came to a stop.

What happened to my sister Vierka? Why had the handsome young SS man pushed Balcie toward the Gate of Life, while he shoved magnificent Vierka in the opposite direction? Twenty-two-year-old Vierka! Mama, of course, had to see to it that the mistake be immediately rectified. I could see her running after Vierka, calling her back. She raced toward the two SS men to explain it all to them. She was stopped by arms with swastika armbands. She yelled, calling Papa, "Yacov! Help!"

"Binele!" I seemed to hear Papa calling back.

Binele. Mama. She ran after Vierka. She ran after Vierka. She ran after Vierka. She ran away from me. She had always loved Vierka more than she loved me.

And so I lost Mama and Vierka. They dropped out from my sight, although the pressure of Mama's fingers on my arm still burned into my skin. I saw myself staggering along with the other dazed women through the Gate of Life—to the accompaniment of the orchestra. I came up right behind Balcie and Malka. Sonia, doubled up, her knees sinking, stumbled ahead as if she were about to collapse to the ground. She held on to her belly as though she were about to give birth, while her head was turned backward, toward the gate. From there came Sarah, pulling Hanka along, in



a kind of dancing step. So musical had we all become. Oh, how Mama and Vierka seemed to come dancing toward me, although I had lost them from sight! The imprint of Mama's hand on my arm was flaming red. She was still holding me tight.

Balcie made a gesture as if to embrace us all. But I could not bear her touch. I was looking back at the gate, waiting for Mama and Vierka to come back to join me.

We walked on and on through the Gate of Life. Such a long deep gate. It led from the wonderland of my childhood, to this land of the truest adult horror.

<sup>1</sup>Tel Aviv, 1992. This excerpt has been translated from the Yiddish by the author.

Kathryn Hellerstein

# GENDER IN THE VOICE OF KADYA MOLODOWSKY: A READING

Kadya Molodowsky (1894–1975) was one of the strongest female Yiddish poets of her generation. She published six major books of poetry, as well as fiction, plays, essays, and children's poems, for which she is best known today. She participated in nearly every aspect of Yiddish literary culture that existed in her lifetime, first in Poland, where she lived until 1935, when she emigrated, and then in America, where she lived until her death. Before her emigration, Molodowsky taught young children in the Yiddish schools of Warsaw. In New York, she supported herself by writing for the Yiddish press and founded a literary journal, *Svive* (Environment), which she edited for nearly thirty years. In 1971, she was awarded the Itsik Manger Prize.

One of the few Yiddish women poets to do so, Molodowsky was able to sustain and develop her writing throughout her life. She published continuously from 1927 until 1974. All her books, both poetry and prose, reflect the cultural and historical changes that their author experienced. But the poetry, in particular, absorbed the often contradictory influences of the cultures among which Molodowsky lived. Although the distinctive voice that emerged from this confluence of cultures addressed the same social issues that concerned her contemporaries, it was given its particular force by

Molodowsky's immediate and intense focus, especially in her earlier poems, on women's lives and works. Because of this focus on female experience, Molodowsky's poems reshape the questions that pervaded modern Yiddish poetry: questions about the poet's (and the poem's) political responsibility, national identity, religious belief, aestheticism, and individualism.

I read and discussed several of Molodowsky's poems. Each of these poems reflects on gender and Yiddish in a particular way, and together they trace the development of a complex attitude toward gender throughout Molodowsky's life.

The first of these is from the 1927 sequence *Froyen-lider* (Women-poems), which poses the central question of Molodowsky's early poetry: How can a woman writer reconcile her art with the culturally dictated, specifically Jewish precepts of womanhood?

The second poem I read is a children's poem. The children's poems that Molodowsky published in Warsaw in the early 1930s are about children who, though deprived of food, money, clothing, and love, possess the imagination to survive and the language to articulate their struggles. One of the best known of these poems, "*Olke*," tells the story of "*Olke/mit der bloyer parasolke*" (Olke and her blue parasol).

The third poem I read, "My Paper Bridge," is from *Dzshike Street* (1933), and confronts the poet's dilemma in a time of political crisis: How can she write poetry that speaks simultaneously for the poet's "blood" and for her people? The poems address this question by focusing on the work of the imagination.

I then spoke about Molodowsky's later books, *Freydke* (Warsaw, 1935), *In land fun mayn gebeyn* (In the land of my bones) (Chicago, 1937), and *Der melekh dovid aleyh iz geblibn* (King David remained alone), (New York, 1946), focusing on themes of feminism, exile, and *khurbn* (holocaust). I ended the reading with "The Sabbath Song," in *Likht fun dornboym* (Light from the thornbush) (Buenos Aires, 1965), in which the speaker is a heroic woman who battles "With the emperors/Of the six days of the week," until the Sabbath Queen appears and, with her blessing, enables the Sabbath candles to bring all the forces of nature under the feminized domain of the Sabbath.

THE SABBATH SONG<sup>1</sup>

דאָס געזאַנג פֿון שבת  
קאַדיע מאָלאָדאָוסקי

מיט די זעקס קיסרים  
פֿון די זעקס טעג פֿון דער וואָך  
האַב איך זיך געקריגט ביז ערבֿ-שבת  
זונטיק האָבן זיי צוגענומען מיין שלאָף.  
מאָנטיק האָבן זיי מיין זאַלץ צעשאַטן.  
און אויפֿן דריטן טאָג, מיין גאָט.  
האַבן זיי פֿאַרשלידערט מיין ברויט  
און איבער מיין פנים מיט ריטער געפֿאַכטן.  
זיי האָבן געכאַפט מיין פֿליענדיקע טויב  
און האָבן זי געשאַכטן.  
און אזוי ביז פֿרייטיק אין דער פֿרי.  
און דאָס איז דאָך מיין גאַנצע וואָך.  
ווען עס שטאַרבט מיין טויבנפֿלי.

פֿאַר נאַכט האָב איך אָנגעצונדן פֿיר ליכט  
און צו מיר איז געקומען די מלכה שבת  
עס האָט אַ ליכט געטאָן איר געזיכט  
און די גאַנצע וועלט איז געוואָרן שבת  
מיין צעשאַטענער זאַלץ  
האַט געפֿינקלט אין זעלצל.  
און מיין טויב, מיין פֿליענדיקע טויב  
האַט געפֿאַטשט מיט די פֿליגל  
און גערייניקט איר העלדזל.

די מלכה שבת האָט געבענטשט מינע ליכט.  
זיי האָבן געלויכטן מיט אַ פֿלאַם אַ קלאָרן.  
די שנין האָט פֿאַרדעקט די טעג פֿון דער וואָך

און דעם קריג מיט די זעקס קיסרים.  
די גרינקייט פֿון בערג -  
איז די גרינקייט פֿון שבת  
דער זילבער פֿון טייך -  
איז דער זילבער פֿון שבת  
דאָס געזאַנג פֿון דעם ווינט -  
איז דאָס זינגען פֿון שבת  
און דאָס געזאַנג פֿון מיין האַרץ -

I fought until Sabbath eve/With the six emperors/Of  
the six days of the week./Sunday they confiscated  
my sleep./Monday they scattered my salt./And on the  
third day, my God,/They flung my bread away/And,  
above my face, they fenced with knights./They  
caught my flying dove/And slaughtered her./And so  
forth, until Friday dawn./And this, you see, ends my  
whole week./With the dying of my dove-flying.

At dusk, I kindled four candles/And the Sabbath  
Queen came to me./Her countenance shone/And the  
whole world became Sabbath./My scattered  
salt/Glittered in the saltshaker./And my dove, my fly-  
ing dove./Flapped her wings/And groomed her throat.

The Sabbath Queen blessed my candles./They shone  
with a clear flame./The light covered the days of the  
week/And the battle with the six emperors./The green-  
ness of mountains—/Is the greenness of Sabbath./The  
silver of a river—/Is the silver of Sabbath./The song of  
the wind—/Is the singing of Sabbath./And the song of  
my heart/Is the eternal Sabbath.

(1965)

<sup>1</sup>Translation by Kathryn Hellerstein.



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## CLOSING PLENARY

### ***Tsukunft/The future: Visions and Realities*** ***Purlaine Lieberman, Chair***

Helen Mintz

#### ***MIR ZAYNEN DO!/WE ARE HERE!*** ***YIDDISH WOMEN'S LEGACY, YIDDISH FUTURE***

Once there was a woman who lived nowhere in particular but wandered from place to place. Wherever she went she listened to the stories women told her. And wove their stories into a tapestry. A tapestry with all the strength of what women have endured and all the strength of what women have done. A tapestry that glistened with dream and possibility.

But the story she wove was unlike any you have ever heard before. The varicolored magic of the sea was in it and the white magic of the stars and, most ineffable of all, the soft wonder of the infinite air. And yet this was no report of a distant time and place. Under the touch of its words, the secret melody of each woman was awakened, the ruined melody which she had presumed dead. Each woman received the message of her dispersed life, that it was still there and was anxious for her. The story spoke to each woman, to her alone. There was no other. She was everyone; she is the tale.<sup>1</sup>

It is an honor to speak at the closing of this amazing, historic conference. I want to share my vision of a developing, vibrant and nurturing culture of women and *yidishkayt*.

My thoughts and vision are based in the work I do. I find and perform stories and poetry of Jewish experience for an English-speaking audience. In this way I am redefining for myself a Judaism rooted in the wisdom and spiritual strength of eastern European Jewish women.

When I was initially approached to give this talk I felt both enormously honored as well as inappropriate for the task. Inappropriate because I am not a fluent Yiddish speaker. But through subsequent discussion I have come to understand that the future of Yiddish culture lies not only with those who speak and read Yiddish fluently but with women like myself, women who struggle to find meaning for ourselves in our Judaism and who see the Yiddish culture of eastern Europe, and our reconnection with it, as the key to our Jewish identity.

I cannot begin without stating the obvious but painful truth. To nurture any culture of women's authentic experience is difficult. But, as a result of the Holocaust, Jewish life in eastern Europe was decimated; the last cohesive generation of native Yiddish speakers, aside from the Chasidim, is aging and dying.

At the same time, at this conference we see that there is a flourishing Ashkenazi women's culture. Many of you, deeply committed to Yiddish culture, speak

Yiddish fluently. And many of us, also committed, know Yiddish inadequately or not at all. Together we form a part of a vibrant, evolving Ashkenazi women's culture. The future of Yiddish lies with all of us.

Together we are faced with the deep pain and great joy of reclaiming this rich culture. And in this reclaiming comes the excitement of forging an entirely new culture, a culture rooted in the old world but living now in the new.

It is a privilege to address this conference and in this way to directly thank my teachers gathered here today, most of whom I have never or only briefly met; women who I have largely known only through their writings. These women have laid the ground on which I stand.

First is Irena Klepfisz, who has mapped a vision of an evolving Jewish women's culture rooted in honesty and bravery. Her writing has been my guide. I also want to acknowledge Kathryn Hellerstein, who first introduced me to Yiddish women's poetry; Norma Fain Pratt, who gave me a glimpse of the enormity of the world of women's writing in Yiddish and spurred me to improve my Yiddish. Beatrice Silverman Weinreich, folklorist, who has brought Yiddish women's stories to a non-Yiddish-speaking audience; Dina Abramowicz, librarian at the Institute for Jewish Research [YIVO]; Clare Kinberg, editor of *Bridges*, who shared her immense knowledge of source material. And so many other women here today whose pioneering work makes my work possible.

As a child I had an ambivalent relationship to Yiddish and Yiddish culture. On the one hand, Yiddish was the key to the forbidden and mysterious world of adult pleasure and secrets. My parents spoke Yiddish whenever they did not want my sister and me to understand. My father was a charismatic joke teller; his jokes were told partially, if not entirely, in Yiddish. So I felt considerable motivation to learn Yiddish. But at the same time I was embarrassed that my parents did not belong to a synagogue; I felt my parents' form of being Jewish, which was based on progressive struggle, Yiddish, and the culture of eastern European Jewish life, was second-rate compared with that of our synagogue-dues-paying neighbors.

As a young adult, when I left both my parents' home and the Jewish community of Montreal and moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, I largely abandoned my Jewishness. I did not have the skills or an understanding of how to create a Jewish world for myself, something with which I continue to struggle.

At the same time, I was aware of how deeply Jewish I felt. I began storytelling to claim my Jewish self. My relationship to Judaism was, at the time, fragmentary and often contradictory. I felt great joy in hearing the familiar sounds of Yiddish, great resonance

with eastern European Jewish culture and history, particularly Yiddish literature, to which I'd been introduced by Ruth Wisse at McGill University. This literature helped me begin to build a sense of myself in relation to an authentic collective past, my past, the past of my grandparents, though it was solely a male past.

But mostly I felt locked into a trauma mentality in relation to my own history, moving between despair over the Holocaust and a picture of eastern European Jewish life which I knew to be romanticized. Cattle cars and crematoria on the one hand and on the other the happy but impoverished Jew playing *his* violin on the roof. I felt ignorant of women's experiences.

I wanted an authentic understanding of the enormous intricacies of my heritage and particularly women's experiences—to know its strengths, its weaknesses, its foibles, its contradictions. And in knowing and learning to celebrate this culture I hoped to celebrate myself. I hoped to develop a visceral world view based more on possibility and joy and less on fear and pessimism.

I began by telling Yiddish folktales but was quickly frustrated by the misogyny of many of the tales. I knew the strength and spirit of the Jewish women who had come before me; women like my *bobe*, an uneducated immigrant with health problems, who supported two children as a single parent during the Depression. And had fun as well: kibitzing about life's absurdity, playing cards late into the night, spending scarce money on a beloved piano.

So I set out to find the folktales that reflected her strength and spirit. This search, by a mere chance, led me to the wealth of absolutely wonderful Yiddish women's poetry.

I was amazed by the enormity of the body of this writing, but even more so by its power and complexity. Kadia Molodovsky, Rokhl Korn, Malka Heifetz Tussman, Celia Dropkin. These are wonderful writers, writers struggling with many of the same issues with which I struggle: the life of an artist and writer, the joys and pain of intimacy and loss, a new relationship to Judaism. In their work I found the rich, complex inner life of Jewish women who had come before me. This was a profound discovery for me, a discovery of parts of myself I've always known were there but could never before name. I situated myself more authentically within my own past, a female past. These women became my role models.

But simultaneous with my excitement over this writing was my frustration with how little was translated. I determined to study Yiddish seriously. Unfortunately, I have not been able to maintain this determination. Other concerns, the demands of children, and the performing world intervened.

Spurred by events like this conference I am again trying to put aside time to learn Yiddish. I realize how much I have been influenced by the message that Yiddish

is not worthy of serious study, the message I internalized as a child. This message has been quietly but effectively reinforced by the lack of support for Yiddish and eastern European Jewish culture both by mainstream Jewish organizations and the larger North American society, by the scarcity of university-level Yiddish courses.

But as I have traveled this road as a storyteller and performer of one-woman shows about Jewish women's experiences, I have come to understand the power of this material to answer for me the major questions of my life.

Recently I spent three years living in a city in which I felt alone, isolated, exiled. Rokhl Korn's poetry was at my bedside. Her depiction of loss so much greater than mine was my companion. "I think I must be part of a dream/spun in grief and fear by the night,/interpreted at the loneliest hour/by the sigh of breaking day" (from "I Feel a Dark Undercurrent").

Another example: I have been looking at how much my attitude toward life is influenced by fear and pessimism. Despite what I said aloud about Jewish bravery during the Holocaust, there were important ways I had internalized a view of Jews as responding to Nazi aggression "like sheep to the slaughter." I held a shamed view of Jews, and thus of myself, as helpless victims. I began to perform memoirs of Jewish women who experienced the Holocaust. The repetition over many performances helped me to internalize an understanding of the Jewish response to Nazi aggression that was as varied as human possibility, a resistance that defied my narrow definitions. This process has been enormously healing to me, and I perform exuberant folktales showing the spirit and vitality of eastern European women, women who not only defied men, but defied even God. I tell their irreverent, feisty jokes. In this way I place myself in a woman's history that is both nourishing and compassionate as well as fun loving, strong, and exuberant.

So my work has broadened from folktales to include stories, poetry, memoirs, dramatized historic documents. Much of the material was originally worded in Yiddish, but I also tell stories that were written in other eastern European languages as well as in English by the women who are traveling this road with me of forging a new, authentic Jewish women's culture.

I have been totally amazed by the response I have received from my work. I have seen women's and men's hunger for understanding and connection with this authentic, unromanticized Jewish past: the women and men who come to my shows and who afterward speak with me or send me letters describing their own lives, the grief they feel over a dead father, their isolation from other Jews; the young Jewish woman with two rings in her nose who told me she was changing her name to that of the *shtetl* heroine of one of the

Yiddish folktales she'd heard me tell; people who are struggling for a redefinition of their own Judaism.

I have come to know that the work of preserving and developing a vibrant contemporary Jewish culture rooted in eastern European women's lived experiences is deeply important work, work that speaks to our spiritual need for connection with our own past; work that speaks to women's and men's need to heal our wounds by facing the Holocaust, but also traveling backward to the complex, vibrant culture that existed before; work that speaks to our need to celebrate ourselves.

All over North America there is a flowering of Jewish women's culture grounded in the experience of Yiddish-speaking women. Powerful writers like Blume Lempel and Chava Rosenfarb continue to write in Yiddish. English translation of Yiddish women's writing, though still inadequate, is increasing. Books like *Found Treasures* give English speakers who do not know Yiddish a glimpse of the enormous possibility of Yiddish women's writings. Hopefully this book is a sign of shelves of books to come. We are looking to our foremothers and telling their stories: women of the Bund, women of YIVO, women in the Yiddish theater. We are creating new art forms using our foremothers' experience as both base and prism. Sima Elizabeth Shefrin, a fabric artist in Vancouver, British Columbia, makes beautiful quilted tapestries. One depicts the resistance fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto; another shows contemporary women and children at a Passover seder. Elana Dykewoman, in Oakland, California, is writing an epic novel, rich in historic and cultural detail, about the experience of Jewish women, beginning in Kishinev in the 1880s. In this novel Elana images for us a complex Jewish lesbian world of the time. *Bridges* magazine publishes both articles of and about traditional *yidishkayt*, for example, Yiddish women's poetry, as well as articles about the experiences and evolving art forms of contemporary Jewish women speaking a myriad of different languages.

Together we form a vibrant, evolving Jewish women's culture. The future of Yiddish women's culture lies with all of us.

For a moment I urge myself to envision a fertile environment for the flourishing of Yiddish women's culture. For a moment I urge myself to forget anti-Semitism in North American culture, to forget the devaluing of all women's culture, to forget the low priority placed on Yiddish culture in most of the mainstream Jewish organizations. For a moment I live in the world as I would like it to be. I see widespread financial and artistic support for the encouragement of Yiddish women's culture. I see groups like the Vancouver Peretz School (a secular Jewish organization that celebrates Yiddish culture) and periodicals like *Bridges* fully supported within the Jewish community. I see conferences like this one, where we can learn from and celebrate our mentors, as

a regular yearly or twice yearly event lasting a full week. I see Yiddish and *yidishkayt* taught in major universities and Jewish community centers across the continent. I see Yiddish writers fully supported to do their work. I see an outpouring of translations of Yiddish women's writings. I see a flourishing of Yiddish clubs, Yiddish circles, Yiddish cultural events, Yiddish festivals.

I see us connecting with other people who can nourish us and from whom we can learn: the First Nations peoples of North America who understand attempted cultural genocide and are resisting in important, inspiring ways; people everywhere who nourish a strong progressive cultural identity, particularly in the face of opposition; artists, writers, translators, publishers. I see a thriving, flourishing Yiddish women's culture, vibrant on its own and interconnected with other people's struggles, experiences, and cultural life. I want to be part of that movement.

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from a Chasidic story.

## Paula Teitelbaum

### FUN DOR TSU DOR/FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

Yiddish is a dominant theme in all aspects of my life: family, professional, and artistic. At home my husband and I speak only Yiddish to our two daughters, ages 4 and 7. I am a teacher and have taught Yiddish for many years, most recently for two years at a yeshiva high school for girls. On the artistic front I am involved in producing a Yiddish recording and accompanying songbook for children.

Why Yiddish? When I am tired of the question, I answer, Why not? But to tell the truth, it is a question that I did think about, first of all, because it happens to be something that most secular Jews, even those who themselves were brought up with Yiddish, don't do, and secondly, because it was important for me to be able to answer my children if and when they should happen to ask.

Yiddish was one of the languages I grew up with in postwar Poland. It was spoken in my home, at the cooperative where my father worked, in the club, where he often took me along to lectures and other events, and on the stage of the Yiddish theater, which captivated me from the start. I went to a Jewish school, where I learned to read and write Yiddish, where I learned to sing Yiddish songs, recited Yiddish poetry, and studied Jewish history. My parents subscribed to Yiddish publications and had many Yiddish books in their library. My environment instilled a strong, positive Jewish identity. In postwar Poland, where some Jews hid their Jewishness, my parents chose to confront the anti-Semitism, which they were certain I would encounter sooner rather than later, by providing me with a connection to my heritage that gave me the pride and the strength to remain whole. When I immigrated to the United States, I found that Yiddish

helped me communicate with family members and others before I learned English. In fact, Yiddish has remained a strong link to our family, whose members have found themselves scattered across many continents. Soon after, when I was fully comfortable in English and did not rely on Yiddish for communication, I found that Yiddish took on another function for me. I was lucky enough to live in New York City and, through Camp Hemshekh, happened upon a group of my peers who also grew up in a secular, Yiddish-speaking environment. My new acquaintances at Camp Hemshekh led me to Yugntruf, where I am still active today. You cannot imagine what that meant to an immigrant adolescent who, despite her very fine fluency in the English language, felt very much adrift in American culture. Yiddish helped me secure a niche in a community. It did not matter that that community was outside the mainstream. To me, it was a lot more than I could have expected growing up in Poland, where my contemporaries did not seem to share my interest, appreciation, and attachment to Yiddish. Those young people I met did.

Years later, I met my husband through Yugntruf, and we decided that we would raise our children in Yiddish when we had them. By raising my children in Yiddish, I am aiming to reach long-range goals as well as some very immediate and pragmatic ones. The long-range goals are to do what my parents did for me: to develop in my children strong ties to and pride in their Jewish heritage and to instill a strong, positive Jewish identity.

I once read an interview with a prominent writer in the New York Times Travel Section. The interviewer asked the writer if he enjoyed traveling. The writer said (I am paraphrasing loosely), travel is only enjoyable when you have a home to come back to. When you know that you can return home, you can truly enjoy foreign landscapes and cultures. But if you are homeless, a refugee, there is no enjoyment in travel. That writer's response rang very true to me. Yiddish is my home. Because of that home, I have been able to successfully delve into other cultures and languages while feeling secure with my own identity.

But why through Yiddish? Can't it be done another way? "Why don't you speak Hebrew?" I am often asked. Because Yiddish is what I have and know and care about. One of my adult students once said, with great regret, "Our parents tried so hard to give us what they never had that they neglected to give us what they did have." Children are very perceptive. They know what matters to their parents and what doesn't. We stand a much greater chance if we attempt to transmit what we ourselves care about deeply than what we think we should care about.

Besides its use in my trying to forge a positive Jewish identity in my children, Yiddish also has some very pragmatic communicative functions in our fami-

ly. My children have a very close bond with my parents simply because the children can communicate in Yiddish. My parents' English is very bad, and their relationship with their grandchildren would have been very different if it were in English. So when on *pey-sekh*, for example, my father tells my daughters about *peysek* in his *shtetl*, the boundaries that have to be conquered are of time and place, but not language. On our trips to Israel to meet family members, who previously lived in Venezuela and the former Soviet Union, my children had no trouble communicating with relatives of my parents' generation and those of mine. The relatives of my children's generation don't know Yiddish, but with their cousins speaking it, they too began to ask their parents and grandparents for Yiddish words and expressions.

How has it been working? So far, so good. Both of my daughters have very strong personalities, and for a while, I expected my older one to rebel at any moment and start questioning why it was that she had to speak Yiddish while none of the kids in her class, or on her block had to. It hasn't happened yet. We started using Yiddish with her when she was still a baby. She developed both Yiddish and English at the same time, and was never confused about which language to use with whom. She has a group of Yiddish-speaking peers at her Sunday Yiddish playgroup, Pripetshik, and one of them is her best friend. They sometimes speak on the telephone during the week, and sometimes have play dates in addition to meeting at the playgroup. When they play in our house, I often hear them switching into English, and then, when I think it's all over and am about to step in and remind them to speak Yiddish, they switch back into Yiddish without my direction and without knowing that I've been listening. The children get a lot of positive attention at school for being such young Yiddish speakers. My older daughter takes a lot of pride in knowing Yiddish and shows a strong interest in learning other languages as well, such as Hebrew, Spanish, and Russian. At a time when nativist and isolationist attitudes are strong and feelings of tolerance and inclusiveness toward ethnic minorities are becoming less visible, I think I am doing something right.

My children know Yiddish as the language of affection, warmth, closeness, and love; the language in which stories are read and songs are sung, compliments are paid, and approval is expressed. They also know it as the language of anger, reprimand, and punishment, negotiation, protest, and many functions in between. They frequently play make-believe and pretend to talk for their Barbie dolls or other toys. The Barbies' dialog is usually in English (Barbies do not speak Yiddish). For example, one Barbie doll says to the other: "Help me! I'm drowning! Quick!" The other

responds, "Here, take my hand. Hold on! Don't let go! Whew! That was close!" but when it comes to direct communication between my daughters, such as "Give me that Barbie; it's my turn; you've had it for such a long time, it's not fair," it always happens in Yiddish: "*Gib mir di Barbie; s'iz mayn rey; du shpilst zikh mit ir shoyt azoy lang, s'iz nisht yoysherdik!*"

Young children may not be ready for the great ethical and moral value lessons of Judaism, but there is one thing for which they are ready from the day they are born—language. It's a shame to let the opportunity to expose them to it slip by.

Besides maintaining Yiddish on the home front, I also teach. Last June, I completed two years of teaching a four-day-a-week Yiddish language course. It was a very pleasant surprise for me to discover how committed to having a Yiddish class and how supportive of me the principal of the school was. It was also interesting for me to discover how strong a connection to Yiddish my students had. Although they couldn't speak Yiddish, they had heard it in the family and in the community, as well as on hit Orthodox recordings. The songs to which my students listen are usually in English or in *loshn-koydesh*, the Hebrew of prayer, with a verse in Yiddish. They know the songs, including the Yiddish verses, by heart, and have often brought such songs into class, to learn what the Yiddish part means. I was surprised to learn that some of my students wanted to learn Yiddish in order to pass it on to their children. I was moved as they responded emotionally to "*Afn pripetshik*," a song instructing the little ones to learn the *alef-beys*, so that they can take on the worthy task of learning Torah. To my students it was not a nostalgic piece done over and over again but a song whose content they felt deeply.

I was impressed by their level of Yiddish readiness. They often were familiar with Yiddish words but only in the narrow context of their world, and sometimes they weren't even aware that these words were Yiddish. For example: When one of my students encountered the Yiddish word for table (*tish*), she said, "I know what that means. It's a party, right?" When I asked her what made her think it meant a party, she said, "Oh, like at a wedding." She was referring to a traditional custom of holding a *khosns tish* at a wedding, where the bridegroom gets to expound on a religious text before the wedding ceremony happens. She was surprised to learn the literal meaning of the word. Another time, I had my students prepare to speak about their families. As part of the preparation, they were free to spend two minutes asking me for vocabulary words they needed to talk about their parents' occupations and whatever else they needed. One of the students asked, "How do you say *shaytlmakher* [wigmaker] in Yiddish?" My answer was, "*A shaytl-*

*makher*." She asked again, "Yes, but how do you say it in Yiddish?" I said, "In Yiddish we say *shaytlmakher*." "Oh, you mean, just like in English?"

On another occasion, when we were learning the days of the week, a different and much more sophisticated student asked me how to say Saturday in Yiddish. I said, "*Shabes*." "Yes, but isn't there a word for Saturday in Yiddish?" she asked. I said, "However one chooses to spend the seventh day of the week, in Yiddish it has only one name—*shabes*." To which she said, "Wow! That's great! Yiddish is such a Jewish language!" At that moment she discovered that language and culture are inseparable.

I was amused at how much my students enjoyed "*Yome, Yome*," a folksong in which a mother tries to guess what her daughter wants: a dress, a hat, a pair of shoes, and finally happens upon the right answer—a bridegroom. My girls thought it was great! Here was probably the only song they had ever sung in school which dealt with the very topic on their fifteen-year-old minds!

I used songs in teaching Yiddish, and I chose my repertoire with care, trying not to offend the school's sensibilities, and with the thought in mind that these girls have many younger siblings, nieces, and nephews, and they marry and have children at a young age. I taught them many songs which they could share with the younger set. I did not even consider the fact that many of them do volunteer work in nursing homes, hospitals, and Jewish education outreach to the public schools. Last year, a student who volunteers once a week to teach Jewish children from the public schools about Judaism asked if I would mind if she taught the Yiddish songs she learned in my class to the children in her program. Of course, I was delighted.

Singing usually works in the classroom, as well as in my kids' bedroom, in the car, as we walk to school—almost anywhere, and with any age group. I sing myself, and I use recordings when possible. If you are trying to learn Yiddish, I highly recommend listening to recordings and trying to learn to sing the songs. There are songbooks that present the lyrics in transliteration as well as in Yiddish; so you can use the printed words to help you.

In fact, let's start right now. Since this has been such a successful conference, let us hope that it will not be the last one. The words of this short Yiddish song, which I learned from Josh Waletzky, express this hope. Listen to the words first.

לאָמיר זיך אַלע היינט געזענענען.

לאָמיר זיך ווײַטשן מול-ברכה.

און אַז מיר וועלן זיך באַגעגענען.

2 { נישט פֿעלן קײַנער זאָל פֿון דער משפּחה.

Let's all say good-bye/Let's wish each other good luck/  
And when we meet again,/Let none of us be missing.



# APPENDIXES

## GLOSSARY

- agode(s):** legend; the nonlegal illustrative material in the Talmud and other rabbinical literature.
- agune:** grass widow whose husband has disappeared or whose death was not witnessed; according to Jewish law, the *agune* is forbidden to remarry.
- alef-beys:** literally, the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet; the Hebrew alphabet (which is used in Yiddish) or the ABCs.
- Arbeter-Ring:** Workmen's Circle (see "Bibliography and Resources," *below*).
- Ashkenaz:** medieval rabbinical name for Germany.
- Ashkenazi:** Jews and their descendants whose roots are in central or eastern Europe as distinguished from those who came from Spain and Portugal (see *Sephardi* below).
- beys-medresh:** prayer and study house; small Orthodox synagogue.
- Der forverts;** also the *Jewish Daily Forward*: Yiddish paper founded in 1897; currently it publishes two weekly papers, one in English and one in Yiddish.
- Der tog** (The day): Yiddish daily paper founded in 1914; no longer published.
- fleyshik:** food or dishes pertaining to meat; see *kashres*.
- folkshule** or *shule*: secular Yiddish or Hebrew school.
- freylekh:** happy, joyous, gay; homosexual (contemporary).
- gemore:** the part of the Talmud that consists of a commentary on the *mishne* (laws and rabbinical discussions).
- haftoyre(s):** prescribed selection from the Prophets read in the synagogue following the Torah reading.
- Hashem:** synonym for God, often substituted for the word *God* when speaking out of the context of formalized prayer; Jews are forbidden to speak God's name.
- halokhe** or *halakha* (adj. *halakhic*): Jewish law, both written and oral.
- haskole** (or *Haskala*): the Jewish Enlightenment, which began in the eighteenth century in Germany and advocated reformation of synagogue ritual and secular education; the movement, in a different form, did not reach eastern Europe until the nineteenth century.
- heymishkayt:** a sense of feeling at home, with connotations of warmth and ease; from *heym* (home).
- kabalah:** a diverse range of Jewish mystical philosophy and activity.
- kadish:** a prayer in praise of God, traditionally recited by mourners for eleven months from the date of burial of a parent, child, or (in certain situations) other closely related family members and then on each anniversary of the actual date according to the Hebrew calendar; among the Orthodox it can be recited only by men.
- kashres** (Heb. *kashrut*): Jewish dietary laws, with special ritual instructions for slaughtering animals; prohibitions against mixing meat and milk; and prohibitions against the consumption of shellfish, virtually all other arthropods, and animals that do not have split hooves or chew their cud.
- kehile:** organized Jewish community with its own governing body or council.
- khasidim; khosid:** member of one of the populist mystical sects founded in eastern Europe in the late eighteenth century; followers of the teachings of the Bal Shem Tov. *Khasidim* rebelled against rabbinic rationalism and promoted communication between the individual and God through prayer and careful observance of ritual.
- khasidism:** beliefs and practice of *khasidim*.
- khaverte(s):** feminine of *khaver* (friend); girlfriend; in progressive circles, woman comrade.
- kheder** (pl. *khadorim*): traditional religious elementary school where boys were taught Hebrew, the Torah, and other religious texts; there also existed (though not as many) special girls' *khadorim*.
- khumesh:** the Torah (Pentateuch); the Five Books of Moses.
- kidesh:** the ritual of sanctification of the Sabbath or festivals; it includes a blessing over wine.
- klasiker:** "the classical ones," referring to the founders of modern Yiddish literature: Mendeley Mokher Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, and Y. L. Peretz.
- loshn-koydesh:** the language of holiness; the Hebrew and Aramaic component of Yiddish.
- mame-loshn:** literally, mother tongue; synonymous with Yiddish.
- maskil(im):** followers of the *haskole* or Jewish Enlightenment.
- matse:** see *peysekh*.
- mayse(s):** story.
- megile(s):** scroll or lengthy document; certain books of the Bible (for example, the Book of Esther) read on specific holidays.



**meydl** (dim. *meydele*): girl.

**midrash**: homiletic narratives intended to illustrate, interpret, or extend the meaning of the Bible and Jewish law.

**milkhik**: pertaining to milk; see *kashres*.

**minyén**: quorum of ten required for communal worship; traditionally males at least thirteen years old.

**misnaged** (pl. *misnagdim*): Orthodox opponent of Chasidism.

**mitsve(s)**: The 613 commandments or obligatory actions based on the Torah and required of the pious; because of their domestic obligations, Jewish women are exempted from the majority of the commandments; in colloquial Yiddish, may also mean "a good deed."

**Mizrakhi**: Jews and their descendants who remained in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa and never migrated to Europe or Spain; often grouped with the **Sephardi** in contrast to the **Ashkenazi** Jews.

**Pale of Settlement**: established in the eighteenth century in czarist Russia; a specific, restricted area where Jews were permitted to settle; boundaries and regulations even within the Pale changed with each czar.

**pareve**: classified by religious law as containing neither meat nor milk and therefore permitted to be used with either; see *kashres*.

**peysek** (Heb. *pesakh*): Passover, seven-day festival commemorating the liberation of Jews from Egypt as told in the Book of Exodus; the first two nights involve a ritual meal (*seder*) and the reading of a text or *hagada*, which traces the story of the Exodus; traditional food includes unleavened bread or *matse*.

**pripetshik**: cook stove.

**rebetsn**: rabbi's wife.

**Sephardi**: descendant of Jews who lived in Spain and Portugal before the Inquisition and Spanish expulsion in 1492.

**shabes** (Heb. *shabat*): the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday).

**shtetl** (pl. *shtetlekh*): small town in eastern Europe with significant Jewish population.

**shul**: synagogue.

**shund**: trash; in Yiddish literature, refers to some popular nineteenth-century writing without literary merit.

**shule**: see *folkshule*.

**sidur**: daily prayer book.

**tam**: taste or flavor.

**tanakh**: the Jewish Bible, which includes the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, or Chronicles.

**taytsh-khumesh**: a Yiddish version of the Torah, usually intended for the use of women.

**tkhine(s)**: Yiddish prayers of supplication especially intended for women; often addressed to the Biblical matriarchs, asking them to intercede for the petitioner.

**Tsukunft** (Future): major socialist and literary journal founded in 1892.

**Tsene urene**: literally, "go forth and behold"; Yiddish book of Bible stories and commentaries, the most popular text of observant women since the seventeenth century.

**tsholent**: eastern European Sabbath stew of meat, potatoes, beans, other vegetables.

**yidene**: Jewish woman; feminine of *yid* or Jewish man; now a pejorative term meaning an unpleasant, gossipy woman; *froy* or woman is used without negative connotation, but it doesn't indicate that the woman is Jewish.

**yidishkayt**: Jewishness; can refer to traditional or secular (e.g., Yiddishist) orientation.

**Yinglish**: a merging of Yiddish and English spoken by immigrants.

**zhargon**: jargon; pejorative name for Yiddish, especially in the nineteenth century.

**zogerin** (*zogerke*, *firzogerin*): literally, female speaker or reciter; women leaders who helped women in the women's section of the synagogue to read prayers and to formulate special pleas to God.

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## RESOURCES

### For Adult Students of Yiddish

#### • Textbooks

- Schaechter, Mordkhe. *Yidish tsvey: A lernbukh far mitndike un vaythalters* (Yiddish II: An intermediate and advanced textbook). Yiddish Language Resource Center, League for Yiddish, Inc., New York, 1993.
- Weinreich, Uriel. *College Yiddish: An Introduction to the Yiddish Language and to Jewish Life and Culture*, rev. ed. YIVO, 1971.
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- Zucker, Sheva. *Yiddish: An Introduction to the Language, Literature, and Culture, A Textbook for Beginners*, vol. 1. KTAV, 1994.

#### • Other adult study resources

- Oxford Institute for Yiddish Studies, Director of Projects, Golden Cross Court, 4 Cornmarket, Oxford OX1 3EX England; (1)865798989. Oxford Programme in Yiddish: four-week summer program; credited intensive language and literature courses on all levels; one-year graduate program leading to a diploma in the teaching of Yiddish.
- YIVO, 555 West 57th Street, Suite 1100, New York, NY 10019; 212-246-6080. Max Weinreich Center for Advanced Jewish Studies: credited courses on all levels in Jewish history, sociology, Yiddish literature, and language. Uriel Weinreich Summer Program for Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture: credited intensive courses on all levels at Columbia University.
- Workmen's Circle, 45 East 33 Street, New York, NY 10016; 212-889-6800. Educational-cultural institution with branches, *shules*, and adult classes; educational resources; also Yiddish Book Center (mail-order book catalog available); the Jacob T. Zukerman Fund supports Yiddish-related projects; also *Global Yiddish*, bulletin of the W.C. Yiddish Outreach Program (bilingual Yiddish news and information clearinghouse).

### Selected Yiddish Resources and Institutions

#### • Publications

- Der bay*. International monthly of Yiddish events and study groups. c/o Fishl Kutner, ed., 1128 Tanglewood Way, San Mateo, CA 94403; 415-349-6946.
- Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends*. Literary/political journal; extensive articles on Yiddish; also publishes Yiddish women's writing both in Yiddish and English. P.O. Box 24839, Eugene, OR 97402; 503-935-5720.
- Jewish Currents*. English-language political/cultural monthly with translations of Yiddish literature and regular columns on "our secular heritage." 22 East 17 Street, Suite 601, New York, NY 10003.

### • Other resources and institutions

- Charlotte Yiddish Institute in North Carolina, P.O. Box 13369, Charlotte, NC 28270. Annual week-long Yiddish language and culture program in August.
- Congress for Jewish Culture, 25 East 21 Street, New York, NY 10010; 212-505-8040. Includes 15 Yiddish institutions; supports cultural activities, gives prizes, publishes *Tsukunft* (literary magazine). Sells books through CYCO (see below).
- CYCO/Central Yiddish Culture Organization, 25 East 21 Street, New York, NY 10010; 212-505-8305. Sells Yiddish books; planning anthology of Yiddish literature.
- Folksbine Theater, 123 East 55 Street, New York, NY; 212-755-2231. Oldest Yiddish theater company in US; annual productions.
- Forward Association, 45 East 33 Street, New York, NY 10016; 212-889-8200. Publishes the weeklies Yiddish *Forverts* and the English *Jewish Forward*; operates New York City-based radio station WEVD 1050 AM with daily Yiddish programs and news.
- Hemshekh/Feminist Institute for Secular Jewish Culture and Continuity, P.O. Box 879, Veneta, OR 97487. Plans bilingual anthology of Yiddish women writers and books for young adults of significant Jewish women figures.
- Jewish Labor Bund, 25 East 21 Street, New York, NY; 212-475-0055. Socialist organization promoting Jewish cultural autonomy.
- KlezKamp (organized by Living Traditions), 430 West 14 Street, Suite 514, New York, NY 10014; 212-691-1271. Annual week-long winter arts festival in Catskill mountains, New York; concerts, performances, and classes.
- Labor Zionist Alliance, 275 Seventh Ave., New York, NY, 10001; 212-675-5138. National organization which supports Yiddish education.
- League for Yiddish, 200 West 72 Street, New York, NY; 10023 212-787-6675. Publishes, sells, and distributes Yiddish books, terminologies, and dictionaries.
- Mendele. Online Internet Yiddish language and cultural discussion source.  
Address: listserv@yalevm.ycc.yale.edu. To subscribe, when message body comes up, type: sub mendeleYourFullName
- National Yiddish Book Center, 48 Woodbridge Street, South Hadley, MA 01075; 413-535-1303. Collects and sells Yiddish books; offers student internships, special weekend and summer programs, membership newsletter, mail order book catalog.
- Virtual Shtetl (World Wide Web): <http://www.ort.org/anjy/resource/a-z.htm>
- Yiddisher Kultur Farband (YKUF), 1133 Broadway, New York, NY 10010; 212-691-0708. A cultural organization that publishes books and journal.
- Yiddishnet (Yiddish on line): Yiddishnet@shamash.nysernet.org
- Yugntruf/Youth for Yiddish, 200 West 72 Street, Suite 40, New York, NY 10023; 212-787-6675. World organization of young (ages 20–50+) Yiddish speakers. Publishes journal and runs Sunday school.
- YIVO/Institute for Jewish Research, 555 West 57 Street, Suite 1100, New York, NY 10019; 212-246-6080. World's largest Yiddish book and archival holdings, educational programs, quarterly bilingual membership newsletter. (Also see Other adult resources, above.)
- Zhitlovsky Foundation for Yiddish Culture, 1133 Broadway, New York, NY 10010; 212-243-1304. Cultural organization; has Yiddish Sunday schools and chorus; produces records and children's books.

## Conference Participants

**Dina Abramowicz** was born in Vilna. Since 1947, she has worked in the YIVO library, serving as head librarian from 1962 to 1987.

**Rozka (Rosa) Luksamberg Aleksandrowicz**, lifelong member of the Bund, is a social work supervisor and field instructor for the Fordham University School of Social Service and a registered nurse.

**Evelyn Torton Beck** is a professor of women's studies and Jewish studies at the University of Maryland (College Park).

**Shulamith Berger** is an author and archivist at Yeshiva University (NYC).

**Mina Bern** has been a performer since her teens, first in her native Poland, then in Israel, and, for the past forty-plus years, in the United States.

**Amy (Eymele) Beth**, a librarian, is a secular Jewish activist and a coordinator of the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

**Dorothy Bilik** is a professor emerita of Yiddish language and literature at the University of Maryland (College Park).

**Adina Cimet-Singer** is a co-chair of Yugntruf and a teacher of Yiddish and Yiddish culture.

**Sarah Blacher Cohen** is a professor of English at SUNY Albany as well as a playwright, author, and performer.

**Adrienne Cooper** is the program director of the Chinatown History Museum (NYC) and a featured vocalist with the klezmer band Kapelye.

**Shulamis Dion** is an ethnomusicologist, lecturer, performer, and teacher of Yiddish in the Greater New York area.

**Shifra Epstein** teaches in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Languages and Literatures at Emory University (Atlanta, Ga.).

**Marcia Falk** is an author, poet, feminist liturgist, and translator of Hebrew and Yiddish.

**Frieda Forman** is the founder and coordinator of the Women's Educational Resources Center at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and one of the editors and translators of *Found Treasures*.

**Judith Friedlander** is dean of the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science and Walter Eberstadt Professor of Anthropology at the New School for Social Research (NYC).

**Ellen Gruber Garvey** is a teacher of English at Jersey City State College, and a writer.

**Troim Handler** is a retired English teacher as well as a poet, lifelong Yiddishist, and Yiddish teacher.

**Annette Bialik Harchik** teaches Yiddish language and literature, Jewish ethics, and history to grade-school students. She is a poet and an education con-

sultant to the Workmen's Circle.

**Helen (Nicky) Caplin Heller** is the executive director of NCJW New York Section.

**Kathryn Hellerstein**, a poet and translator, teaches Yiddish literature and language at the University of Pennsylvania.

**Paula Hyman** is Lucy Moses Professor of Modern Jewish History and chairperson of the program in Judaic studies at Yale University.

**Eve Jochnowitz** is a writer and lecturer as well as a graduate student in the Department of Performance Studies at NYU.

**Naomi Kadar** is a doctoral candidate at Columbia University and a consultant to the The Workmen's Circle (NYC).

**Rayzl Kalifowicz-Waletsky** is the coordinator of the Yiddish Outreach Program of the Workmen's Circle, and a Yiddish teacher.

**Ellie Kellman** teaches Yiddish language and literature at the University of Toronto and in the Columbia University/YIVO Summer Program.

**Clare Kinberg** is a cofounder and the managing editor of *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends*. She is an activist in the Jewish and lesbian communities in Eugene, Ore.

**Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet** is a professor of performance studies and of Hebrew and Judaic studies at NYU. She has been associated with YIVO since 1967.

**Sharon Kleinbaum** is the rabbi of Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, New York City's Gay and Lesbian Synagogue.

**Irena Klepfisz**, a committed Yiddishist and secularist, is a poet, writer, activist in the lesbian-feminist-Jewish communities and a teacher of Jewish women's studies at Barnard College, Columbia University.

**Chava Lapin-Reich** is the national director for cultural affairs at the Workmen's Circle (NYC). She is on the board of directors of YIVO.

**Purlaine Lieberman**, a health economist, is co-chair of the JWRC and a member of the board of NCJW New York Section.

**Helen Mintz** is a Jewish story teller and theater artist and conducts workshops to explore Jewish ethnic and cultural identity.

**Deborah Dash Moore** is a professor of religion at Vassar College (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.) and director of its American Culture program. She is editor of the *YIVO Annual*.

**Goldie Morgentaler** is a translator, a teacher of Yiddish language and literature, and a contributor to the language column of the *Montreal Gazette*.



**Ester Moskowitz**, a retired publishing executive, editor, and writer, is a member of the Steering Committee of the JWRC of NCJW New York Section.

**Edna Nahshon** teaches in the Hebrew Department of the Jewish Theological Seminary (NYC).

**Anita Norich** is an associate professor of Yiddish and English at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor).

**Beverly (Brurye) Post** is a member of the Steering Committee of the JWRC. She is a certified foot reflexologist and documentary filmmaker.

**Norma Fain Pratt**, a writer and translator, teaches history at Mount San Antonio College (Calif.).

**Ethel Raicus**, a designer and painter, is one of the editors and translators of *Found Treasures*.

**Ellen Rifkin** is a teacher, writer, and lesbian activist and currently works with Hemshekh.

**Lea (Elinor) Robinson** is the editor of Yugntruf's magazine and secretary of the Manhattan *Shraybkraz* (writing circle). She is a Yiddish teacher, poet, and writer.

**Chava Rosenfarb** is a prize-winning Yiddish poet and writer. Her first collection of poems, written in the Lodz ghetto, was published in 1947.

**Joyce Rosenzweig**, a pianist and recitalist of Yiddish folk and art songs, is on the faculty of the School of Sacred Music of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (NYC).

**Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild** is a professor of graduate studies at Norwich University.

**Edith Samuels**, co-chair of the JWRC, has held a variety of positions in Jewish organizations. She began studying Yiddish five years ago.

**Nahama Sandrow** is the author of articles about

Yiddish and other ethnic theaters. She has had two off-broadway shows based on Yiddish theater material.

**Beyle Schaechter-Gottesman** is a Yiddish poet, songwriter, and artist. *Lider* (Songs), in Yiddish and English, was published in 1995.

**Gid Schaechter-Viswanath** is a Yiddish editor and typesetter. Her day job is in nursing home administration.

**Naomi Seidman** is an assistant professor of Jewish culture at the Center for Jewish Studies of the Graduate Theological Union (Berkeley, Calif.) and a Hebrew and Yiddish translator and creative writer.

**Eve Sicular**, formerly curator of the Film and Photography Archives at YIVO, is an independent film producer and the drummer and group leader of The Greater Metropolitan Klezmer Band.

**Sarah Silberstein Swartz**, an author and translator, is one of the editors of *Found Treasures*.

**Paula Teitelbaum**, a teacher and performer, teaches Yiddish at Shevach High School for Girls in Kew Gardens Hills (NYC).

**Suzanne Toren** has appeared on and off Broadway, in regional theaters, and on TV. She also narrates Talking Books for the Library of Congress.

**Bina (Beatrice Silverman) Weinreich** is a research associate in Yiddish folklore and a faculty member of YIVO as well as an editor and author.

**Chava Weissler** is an associate professor of religion at Lehigh University (Bethlehem, Penn.), where she holds the Philip and Muriel Berman Chair of Jewish Civilization.

**Sheva Zucker** has taught university-level Yiddish and Jewish literature and is the author of a Yiddish textbook.





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